

**BLUE  
PETE:  
HORSE THIEF**

**LUKE ALLAN**

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HORSE THIEF**

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BLUE PETE : HORSE THIEF

### WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

In the middle of a cattle rustling epidemic Don Farren of the Inverted T ranch and his foreman Spud called Blue Pete a horse thief and trumped up a charge against him to the Mounties. But Pete was not of the kind that takes that sort of thing lying down, and even if it meant tackling the Mounties and the ranchers singlehanded he meant to break even.

This is a western novel by an author whose previous "westerns" have sold in tens of thousands. Blue Pete, the most famous and best-known of all cowboy characters, is at his best in this hard-riding, snap-shooting novel of the windswept prairies and the hills beyond.

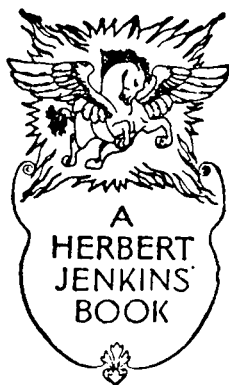
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285-6*

# BLUE PETE: HORSE THIEF

A Mounted Police Story

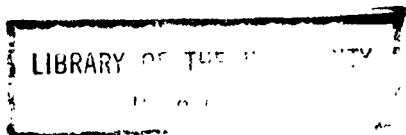
BY  
LUKE ALLAN

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*All characters in this book are purely imaginary  
and have no relation whatsoever to any living persons.*



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## CHAPTER I

### A RANCHER'S HATREDS

A MERCILESS Western sun, far past its meridian, drenched the prairie with a blinding glare. Miles of dead grass, as far as the eye could see, monotonous, eye-searing, soporific, in time nerve-racking, waved away in broken rolls on every side, like the swell of the sea after a storm. The long-dead grass that concealed the fresh growth beneath bent limply before a gentle breeze. Not a tree in sight, not a building, not a fence, not a movement. Lifeless, deserted, silent, oppressive—the great range country of the West.

Lifeless and silent, that is, save for the flimsy buckboard that clung to the deeply worn double ruts whose course followed an ancient buffalo trail. Treeless save for the dark line far behind that marked the location of the Cypress Hills.

Swiftly and steadily the slat-boarded vehicle flew along at the heels of a team of galloping bronchos that had not altered their pace since leaving the Inverted T half a dozen miles behind—a tireless pace that would continue, save for a judicious slowing down for the down-grades and a speeding up for the up-slopes, until the peopled streets of Medicine Hat imposed a more sedate advance.

Behind and about the flying hoofs and spinning wheels drifted the almost impalpable brown dust of the trail, a cloud that nevertheless had already tinted the shoulders and knees of the three occupants of the buckboard.

The eldest of the trio, Don Farren, held the reins. Held them lightly, for the bronchos needed neither direction nor whip. He was a large, raw-boned man of fifty, grim of visage, with heavy eyebrows and a firm mouth, a riot of vigorous, iron-grey hair pouring from beneath his great black Stetson. A masterful man. The hand that held the reins was steady and brown, the bared forearm knotted with muscle. The feet, planted wide on the spaced slats of the buckboard, expressed something of the sturdy, immovable character of their owner.

At his side on the spring seat sat his elder son Horace, always known as Horry. He was tall as his father, and his hair was thick and dark, but there the similarity, in details scarcely discernible, ended. The difference lay in character, in mental attitude, in decision, vigour, self-confidence. Elbows lounging over knees, he appeared to be dozing, his body swaying easily to the movements of the buckboard. A young man who did not count.

In the back, seated on the slats, his legs swinging between the wheels, was Andy Farren, a younger son. Twenty years of age, four years younger than his brother, he might have been no more than sixteen. In manner, in the bright eagerness with which he looked about, in the joyous kicking of his feet and flinging of his arms, as if some stray ingredient of the atmosphere had touched a responsive chord, he was little more than a child. A lighted cigarette drooped from between his lips, and when the exuberance of his spirits called for no exertion his back rested against a box that, anchored to the buckboard, showed the long barrel of a Winchester protruding from the top.

A handsome young fellow, appealing in his animation, unrestrained, grasping at each passing pleasure, his hair thick as his father's, full, smiling lips, broad shoulders, there hung about him, as betrayed by the

swift glances he cast at the pair of backs before him, a certain uneasiness and irritation.

All three were in their shirt sleeves, but in the box, carefully wrapped in paper, was the coat the father would don at the edge of the town. Horry's attire was as inconspicuous as himself, but Andy was a spot of colour. Over his tousled fair hair he wore a huge white sombrero pushed well back, and his dangling legs were encased in the white sheepskin chaps shunned by the pukka cowboy. His riding-boots were—or they had been when he left the ranch—polished to the brightness of a mirror, and the heels were the highest in the district. The cowboy neckerchief was there, too, but, in concession to his father, he had knotted it beneath the collar of a white shirt. There had been some difficulty in obtaining a silk kerchief in the blue and white of the university where he had spent two strenuous years.

For a long time they had ridden in silence. But it was a silence heavy with portent. Even had the two boys not known their father as they did, the set of those grim jaws told a story of suppressed irritation that would presently burst forth. The explosion came somewhat sooner than even the sensitive Andy expected.

Don Farren's long legs jerked together, and his shoulders lifted.

"I wish to Go—goodness, Andy, you'd left those da-arned silly chaps at home," he growled. "You're not riding now, and you won't be till we get back."

Andy pursed his lips, but said nothing. Don Farren continued:

"And we'll have all we can do to get those supplies in before the shops close." He was still English enough to call them "shops."

There was really nothing to say to that, partly because it was unarguable, more because both boys knew it was but preliminary to more peevish expressions.

"And we're stopping at the Alberta to-night—and going to bed early, too. We'll be off early in the morning. . . . And no loafing about the Royal, remember that."

It had come. It had nothing to do with Horry, whose loafing was more persistent, but less objectionable to his father. To Andy it came with a slight shade of relief that the thing was out at last—the annoyance that had set Don Farren's jaw and deepened the natural fierceness of his strong face.

"I suppose that's where you spent the last weekend," growled the older man.

Andy shot an uneasy glance at his back. "It's cheaper than at the Alberta."

"Cheaper's right," sneered Don. "Cheaper and rowdier. Cheapness—that's the sort of thing that suits you. And you know da-arned well I don't stint you. Why the—the blazes you have to be trapesing about the country like you do beats me." Picturesquely and uncontrollably lurid in his language before outsiders, Don Farren had always imposed a strict if somewhat tardy restraint on his tongue before his family. Everyone in the family but himself realized this enforced self-censorship only increased his irritation, making restraint more wearing and difficult. "Besides, Medicine Hat's no place for a young man with nothing to do. You're getting out of hand."

The last sentence, in effect an admission of defeat, so unlike his dictatorial father, brought a sly grin in Andy's face.

"I suppose it's the fault of my education—or my semi-education, I mean."

"Your education!" The older man made a sound of disgust. "Semi's right. You'd never be anything more than semi-anything. You haven't the guts. I should have recognized that before I let you go to college."

"You didn't let me, dad—you sent me."



Don Farren shifted his big body irritably. "I had a foolish hope—I see how crazy it was—that you might settle down."

"Give me time, dad, give me time. I'll settle down—some time."

Horry snickered audibly. "Perhaps on a farm, eh?"

A slight flush mounted to the younger brother's face, and he scowled at Horry's back. Apprehensively he waited to see if his father would follow it up.

He did: "And I won't have you hanging about that Cutten place. If I catch you there——"

The threat was left in mid-air. All Don Farren's threats to his family were incomplete. He was not accustomed to making threats he failed to carry through.

But it was something else this time that cut him short. His vaguely wandering gaze had fixed itself on an object away along the trail before them, a mere spot on the horizon. It was a spot that grew swiftly larger.

Horry, too, had seen it; and Andy, leaning forward, watched through the dust a mounted figure swinging rapidly nearer. They knew it was mounted, because nothing human ever went on foot on the prairie. At the same time there was something abnormal in the proportions of the object of their attention.

"That damned half-breed!" His feelings had overcome his self-control.

On and on tore the tireless bronchos. And the oncoming rider seemed almost to jump at them. They could distinguish detail now, though the moment they recognized him every detail was stamped on their memories. The half-breed, a great hulking figure of a man, was mounted on a grotesquely small pinto, one foot appearing almost to brush the grass at the side of the trail. He slouched in the saddle, right leg lifted and caught about the horn, the foot on the left side of the pinto's neck. The reins were caught loosely in a

huge brown left hand, the long loose ends curling almost to the ground.

A huge fellow, appearing larger because of the size of his mount, his shoulders were rounded to a permanently indolent curve, the left shoulder slightly lower than the right. His expressionless face was dark-skinned, with a suggestion of blue in it that could not be the tan of the prairie sun. Neither could the high cheek-bones and stiff black hair. Outwardly an Indian, yet so manifestly not. There was none of the stiff dignity of the Indian, assumed to conceal his diffidence and a sense of ostracism; yet in the whole figure—even, somehow, in the mask-like face—was a self-sufficiency that was neither aggressive nor evasive. A man who preferred to be left alone—whom it was wise to leave alone.

He was dressed as a cowboy, but with individual touches. The great sombrero, once expensive, the band studded with metal discs, was so soiled that its original colour was in doubt. The chaps that enclosed his bowed legs were so stiff and thick that they appeared to have been moulded to the curve of the pinto's back. His shirt was a colour scheme of shocking black and red, and the flaming red silk kerchief about his neck was so loosely knotted that it threatened to drop loose with every move. To the back of his high-heeled riding-boots was attached a pair of nightmarish spurs with two-inch rowels that looked as if they might impale a horse as small as the one he rode. His vest, left open, was flung back so far, either by never being buttoned or by the wind, that it appeared from the front only as a band over his shoulders.

But most conspicuous of all as he came near enough to make them out were his eyes—surely the crookedest in all the West. There were those who seriously ascribed the half-breed's impunity through a lifetime of more or less murderous enemies to some uncanny property of those disorganized eyes.

Horse and rider came on. And without visible direction the little pinto turned aside to the grass, abandoning the trail to the buckboard. So far the half-breed had not so much as raised his face. But as he came level with the buckboard he glanced—certainly one eye did—at Don Farren. The rancher grunted.

"Howdy!" muttered the half-breed.

Then, as he passed beyond Don Farren's view, his quirt shot out and flipped lightly across the dangling riding-boots of the young man seated between the wheels.

Andy laughed. "H'are you, Pete?"

Don Farren's quick eyes must have caught the movement of the quirt, or he heard the "clack" of lash against leather, for he whirled about, his eyes flashing angrily.

"Did he strike you, Andy—that damned 'breed?" he bellowed. "Some day I'll get mad and break loose," he added viciously.

"Well, don't try to draw on him, dad," warned Andy.

"You wouldn't know what got you."

Farren scowled after the retreating back. As he straightened his body he growled:

"He isn't a rancher; I don't believe he even likes the job. The Three-Bar-Y is just a place to sleep when he gets tired of riding about . . . or remembers he has a wife."

"Perhaps," suggested Andy, "it's because we won't let him be a rancher like the rest of us."

"I wish to—to blazes we knew how to get rid of him. . . . And married to a white girl! And owning one of the best ranches in the country . . . and the best cattle! Won't let him be a rancher, eh? Well, that's all we can do about it—cut him. Thank God, we're all doing that!" He shifted irritably in his seat, as if there were other things for which, unfairly, he was not yet able to be thankful.

"After all," said Horry, "he's not a rancher. The Three-Bar-Y is Mira's, not his."

"Try that one on Mira," said Andy. "Too bad we

have to admit he's the best rider, the best shot, the best roper, the best judge of stock, and the best hand with cattle or horses, on the whole prairie. And Mira's pretty nearly the best rancher."

"She ought to be," said his father grudgingly. "Born here—never saw anything but a ranch, never been farther away than the Hat. But a white woman marrying a 'breed!" He spat dryly over the wheel. "And married him right after he shot her brothers!"

"But he didn't." Andy's tone was slightly impatient. "He had nothing to do with it, and we know it. Crazy way that story hangs on. They shot themselves rather than be taken by the Mounties for rustling. You'd do the same yourself before you'd be taken, with the evidence staring against you."

Don Farren turned slowly and looked down on his younger son, his heavy brows forming almost a connected line across his forehead. "Why should they ever catch me doing that?" he demanded. "And don't be impertinent," he ended, jerking back to face the bronchos.

For a time they drove on, the silence broken only by the dull thud of four pairs of flying hoofs and the creaking of the buckboard. The thin veil of dust rose like a shadowed mist about them. Suddenly Don Farren twisted his body and stared back along the trail.

"Say, where the de—dickens did that breed go?"

They all looked. But the back trail wound away untenanted, two narrowing lines that rose and fell with the rolls in the prairie. Yet in the distance the half-breed could have travelled, they knew, was not a dip that would hide more than a coyote.

Horry shook his head. "Something spooky about him. Here this minute, gone the next. It's always been the same. What happens? Where does he vanish to? What does he do? He doesn't ride with the Three-Bar-Y outfit, and they say he's away most of the time."

"Huh," growled his father, "I wouldn't trust him from here to the broncho's ears. Once a rustler, always a rustler. That judge knew that when he turned him down when the Mounties tried to use him as evidence in that rustling case from Irvine. . . . If he hadn't seen through the 'breed, he'd probably still be working for the Mounties," he ended thoughtfully.

Horry's face lit up. "Say, dad, perhaps he's the rustler that's been taking our stock. Anyone with eyes like that——"

"Sa-ay!" Don Farren sat up. "That's an idea. I'll drop that in Inspector Barker's ear for a tickler. It's a da-arned shame the Mounties had to sink so low as to use a 'breed."

"I thought it was all Lee Cutten," said Andy slyly. "That's the way it was this morning."

Don Farren shook himself irritably. "That's right. It must be Cutten. Any fool who could think he could farm in this cow country——"

The sharp sound of a rifle-shot behind him made him jerk nervously about. Andy, rifle in hand, had already leaped clear of the wheels, and, stopping only to stamp his cigarette out in the dust of the trail, he raced away over the grass.

"Hold up, dad," he shouted. "I got that coyote in the leg. I'll have to finish it."

Don Farren drew the bronchos in and watched. A second shot rang out, and Andy disappeared over a rise. Presently he came jogging back, wiping his forehead, the fur of his chaps fluttering in the breeze.

"Not so bad for a lad who wasted two years in the city," he laughed. "Got that fellow in the leg from the buckboard, then straight through the heart the next shot at two hundred yards. Going fast, too."

"You should join the Mounties," teased Horry.

"I might do worse."

"I wouldn't be surprised," agreed Horry, with a short laugh.

## CHAPTER II

### THE INVERTED T

THERE was really nothing spooky about Blue Pete's disappearance—unless it was the mystery of the reason for it. The buckboard had fallen behind him only a short distance when he reached into his vest pocket and extracted a small mirror. Raising his left arm as if to adjust his stetson, he held the mirror beneath his arm in such a position as to enable him to watch the retreating trio.

Convinced that they had forgotten him, at least temporarily, he turned the pinto into a draw that fell away from the trail. In sixty yards it deepened to a coulee. It was still too shallow to conceal him, so he dismounted and, dropping to the grass, signalled to the pinto to lie down. With a grunt of protest it obeyed, flattening out and lying motionless save for the scraggly tail that seemed to demand an explanation. But Blue Pete was already on his way up the slope, crawling on hands and knees.

At the top he lay watching the diminishing buckboard for a long time. He saw the three Farrens turn and scan the trail, and he slid back to the pinto, his head shaking, a sheepish grin on his swarthy face.

"Whiskers, ole gal," he apostrophized the pinto, "it ain' no business o' mine nohow. . . . Leastwise not yet it ain't. An' I hope it never won' be. . . . Jes' curyus—that's me. An' then I fin' out things I don' wanta know . . . mostly thet they ain' wot they otta be in this world, eh, ole gal?"



He followed the coulee until it swung back towards the trail. Every dip, every rise, every twist and turn—almost every blade of grass on the prairie—he knew as no one else knew them. Even by night he was seldom at fault, partly because he had the eyes of a cat, partly because there had been a time, and not so long ago, when his very life depended on registering all these things for future use. He was never sure that the time might not come again. Anywhere within a hundred miles to east or west he could have found his way in the dark; and even more intimately he knew the prairie far to the north, away about Medicine Hat to where the new railway had been built, and far down through the Badlands of Dakota—a week's fast ride from north to south. Pursuing or pursued, dodging bullets or aiming them, rustler or Mounted Police detective, always with his life hanging on a thread, he had ridden it all, day and night, in every weather, against every odds; and always alone save for the short periods when Mira his wife was with him, or Sergeant Mahon of the Mounted Police.

Even there in what was called the level prairie he knew of a thousand hiding-places, where a tangled web of coulees and draws and bottoms provided concealment, where a shrub, a cactus, a stunted cottonwood, a mound thrown up by a gopher, was the only screen for himself and Whiskers from suspicious or inimical eyes. For the pinto was his second self, understanding his every move, obeying wordless orders unquestioningly, trusting, loyal to the death, human in everything but speech. A mare, something of a freak in the country that considers only geldings fit for ranch duties, Blue Pete talked to her even more than he did to his wife, perhaps because Whiskers never argued, never opposed, never urged him against his will, never convicted him of thoughtlessness and lawlessness. A wonderful pair they were.

By the time he reached the trail once more the buckboard was no more than a speck on the horizon, disappearing now and then into the folds of the prairie, only to rise a smaller speck beyond. Whiskers had dropped back to her tireless lope, quickened a little by the thought of home. Her unshod hoofs beat a sleepy tattoo on the soft trail, and her scraggly tail swung ridiculously out on the wind her speed created.

After a time Blue Pete raised his eyes. They settled on a dark line away to the south-east. It had been growing larger ever since leaving Medicine Hat. From here it was distinguishable as trees growing on heights, a break in the prairie, a freak of Nature—the Cypress Hills. The sun had dropped low in the sky far to the north-west. It shone full on the face of the hills, and Blue Pete's eyes flashed as they caught the dark-green line. Memories. There were plenty of them—danger, comedy, suffering, pain, even death, but always the excitement that made life worth living. His head shook wonderingly, and he reached down to pat Whiskers's mottled neck. And the pinto, as if she, too, remembered, whinnied back, her ridiculous tail twitching busily.

A branching trail cut away to the east, and the half-breed involuntarily drew up. And his wavering eyes followed the double ruts until they vanished over a rise, only to appear again half a mile farther away and vanish for good. For several minutes he sat, his brow puckered.

"Might's wal, ole gal," he muttered, turning the pinto into the new trail.

The ruts were shallower here, and they meandered more pointlessly. Buffalo had fed there in years gone by, working their way more slowly towards the winter trail, to the shelter of the cutbanks, forty miles away, where Medicine Hat now lay. In the dust was marked plainly the passing wheels of the buckboard. And

as he rode along a whimsical, half-apologetic smile twisted the half-breed's face.

" Might's wal, ole gal," he repeated, as if trying to satisfy himself.

Some two miles from the main trail he topped a crest in the prairie and pulled up.

There below him, snuggled in a fertile bottom where a stream ran in spring-time, lay a cluster of ranch buildings surrounded by a wire fence. A tidy, substantial, complete collection of structures that the half-breed eyed admiringly, his hands folded over the horn of his saddle, his forehead puckered.

The Inverted T ranch had a reputation. Don Farren, its owner, was born of wealthy parents in England, a younger son of minor nobility. Almost twenty years ago he had, after a quarrel with his father, broken away and come to Canada, bringing with him an adoring wife and three small children, Andy a baby in arms. Always hopeful, always confident, he had tried his hand at a half-dozen jobs, taking at first anything that offered. But within a year he had discovered how few qualifications he possessed for the type of life he had failed to envisage in the new land. It had not discouraged him. Confident that there was somewhere a niche he could fill, he had set out for the West, adventurous, determined, energetic—just the type of man to succeed where he was going.

Always fond of horses, he had purchased a few acres from the Government at a few cents an acre and had established the Inverted T as a horse ranch. Inexperienced, he had selected the location in the spring, when the small valley was green with fresh grass, with a stream running sweetly in its midst, and with a few cottonwood trees setting it apart from the bald prairie above. All about him lay unlimited, open prairie where his horses might feed without cost. All about him, too, ranged cattle; and within three years

he took to cattle, retaining the horses as a sideline, stubbornly unwilling to admit that he had come with anything to learn.

Yet he was always learning.

When, with summer heat, the stream dried up, he was not appalled. A windmill struck water at a shallow depth, justifying his choice of location.

He had branched out in so many ways. There was, for instance, the ranch-house he built himself. It was an amorphous structure that catered more to his flair for grandeur than to either art or comfort. At terrific expense he had imported from Ontario enough brick for the lower story; then, whether frightened by the cost, or in accordance with his plans, he had drawn logs all the way from the Cypress Hills, to complete the building. The result came to be called "The Castle."

His stables were imposing, worthy of the horses he planned to raise; his corrals were neater and sturdier than those of his neighbours, and the other buildings—bunk-house, store-house, and blacksmith-shop—were appropriate to the position he considered a rancher should hold in the country.

The hay-corral came only after he had gone into cattle. Perhaps it was because he was still a tender-foot that he noticed why severe weather exacted such a toll from cattle and not from horses. For with every Chinook, the warm wind that sometimes blew with startling suddenness over the prairie in the heart of winter, the surface snow melted, only to form into a hard crust with the next frost. Through this crust the horses pawed their way to the grass beneath. But the ankles of the cattle were too tender, and, weakened by short rations or starvation, the first storm overwhelmed them. The fact that his cattle sometimes saved themselves by following in the tracks of his horses had no bearing on the energy with which he set about the remedy. He solved the problem

by purchasing a mower and laying up a store of winter feed from the long grass that carpeted the prairie in the summer—the first by a dozen years to take such a simple precaution against winter loss.

His fellow-ranchers, most of whom lived in luxury in great houses on the Esplanade in Medicine Hat, visiting their ranches only as an outing, laughed at him at first, even sneered. For nothing angers an old-timer like a successful innovation introduced by a tenderfoot. Ranching had theretofore been a hit-and-miss business, the hits outnumbering the misses, of course, but the trend of success left to Providence. When they learned that mere man had something to do with the amount of profit, and that Don Farren didn't care a cuss what they thought of him, their ridicule turned to respect.

There were other reasons to respect him. He was blunt, blasphemous, quick-tempered and noisy, but he was fearless, too, honest as he saw things, large-handed, decent, self-sufficient. Crossed, he was ruthless; but he was always ready to help, and grim in defence of the "rights and privileges" of his class.

Through the vicissitudes of those first seven years of struggle in the new land, right up to the completion of the ranch buildings, Mrs. Farren had played her part in an existence that had few attractions for her apart from her family. Then, when the future was assured, she had faded out before a climate to which she was not adapted—and before a husband incredulous that anything so tragic could happen to him.

At the time of her death Horry had reached the age of twelve, Andy eight. In between came the one girl, Gypsy. For two years the household had struggled through the varying attentions of a succession of housekeepers whose one thought appeared to be for a permanent home as mistress of the grand house. Realizing the hopelessness of that, they had lost interest, drooped and been dismissed. Then Gypsy, aged

twelve, had taken the bit in her teeth, almost literally throwing out the latest incumbent of the position. Ever since that time she had ruled. That is, as far as Don Farren permitted any woman to rule. The extent of that permission had greatly increased since Gypsy took hold.

For the girl was capable, and with it was iron-willed, physically strong, aware of what she wanted and never losing sight of her goal. It had won her a freer hand than her mother had ever dreamt of. With few delusions about her men, she had learned to handle them. Resisted, she merely sat back and waited, confident of winning her way in the end.

Even before her mother died she had developed the older woman's daintiness, and with it a refreshing vigour that carried her plans through and made of the ranch-house a home.

But Gypsy Farren was by no means a happy girl.

### CHAPTER III

#### A COWBOY DRAWS

FOR a time Blue Pete lost himself in the pleasant scene. His mind had flown back to Mira's fumbling efforts about the 3-Bar-Y. He envied no one, but Mira's discontent with life as she had been raised to it, her blundering but tireless search for something it was not in her to find, made his heart ache for her; and his speechlessness before emotion denied him the one outlet he might have had.

He would have given all he ever hoped for to be able to tell her it did not matter, that nothing she could do would make him happier than he was, that the refinements, the elaborations, attained by such ambitious housewives as Gypsy Farren would only embarrass him.

It was not entirely the fault of his dumbness that he could not tell her all that. The fact was that ranches like the Inverted T had an irresistible attraction for him—the chintz curtains, the brightly painted door, the coloured awnings, the flower-beds in their odd shapes, the glimpse of vivid rugs he had caught through the open door. Often he found his way to the ranch on some trifling excuse, to sit and puzzle over it all. And always he went away with a greater admiration for the white wife he had married—Mira, who was never satisfied, who persisted in struggling against such odds.

He sat and brooded.

"An' yet, Whiskers," he muttered, "thar ain' none

o' them got a durn' thing on th' Three-Bar-Y an' Mira."

Suddenly the great brown hands on the saddle-horn tightened, and his body stiffened. Down below, a cowboy strolled from the bunk-house and looked idly about. Against the skyline horse and rider were plainly etched; and the cowboy, after a glance, hurried back into the bunk-house.

Blue Pete gave no sign that he observed the movement, but he set Whiskers in motion and rode slowly down the slope. At the gate in the wire fence that surrounded the buildings he leaned from the saddle and tugged at a rope that, by an ingenious device, slid the gate back. A similar rope on the other side returned it to its original position.

Only as the gate creaked into place did it occur to the half-breed that he had no explanation for his visit—none, that is, that he could make public. Half a hundred times he had looked down from the surrounding heights, concealed in the long grass; and there had been times when he was prepared to be greeted from the ranch-house itself. But this time—he had no idea what it was that had induced him to come so frankly into the Inverted T enclosure.

It was too late to retire now, and he rode boldly forward. As he neared the ranch-house it cut from view the bunk-house and corrals. But, as he advanced, a couple of cowboys emerged from the direction of the corrals, each holding by the neck a bawling calf, and dragged it towards the stables. They paid no attention to the half-breed.

A puzzled frown lined Blue Pete's forehead as he watched from beneath his brows. From the rear of the cook-house the yellow face of the Chinese cook dodged into view and disappeared, and a curious, brooding lifelessness and silence fell over the scene. But he knew that from behind half a dozen windows keen eyes were fixed on him.



That in itself meant nothing. He was accustomed to it—the unending curiosity he always aroused, the disinclination of his fellow-ranchers and cowhands to come to close quarters. He was a half-breed, and, while the Indians were treated with indulgent condescension, for him they had nothing but suspicion and dislike, and took no care to hide it. It was a condition he could not fight, did not try to fight. Had they carried their dislike to insult he would have been better satisfied, for he knew how to deal with that—knew so well that no one ventured to try it now, save at moments of extreme aggravation or under conditions of assured safety.

He had learned to accept it outwardly, for, in a way, he could not blame the ranchers. A half-breed was an insult to his part-white origin, and was popularly supposed to possess only the worst traits of both races. But worse even than that: he had married a white woman and become a rancher himself, multiplying the insult a thousand times. The result was that it was even held against him that he was so uncannily adept with his .45 and his lasso. It seemed to afford justification for their suspicion that his wanderings had something lawless about them; his flea-like propensity for being where he was not expected was evidence of guilt.

Facing the issue of his unexplained visit, he twisted uncomfortably in his saddle. "Gor-swizzle!" he grunted, in a panic. And Whiskers, as if giving him a chance to escape, pulled up and waited to be urged forward.

With a jerk of the reins the half-breed sent her on. And with every step his embarrassment increased. Should he ride on to the bunk-house and face that cold silence, the closed door behind which lay a glum reception that would not even try to conceal its dislike, or should he risk the less unwelcome but more formidable Gypsy, who, he knew, would be alone?

‘The decision was made for him.

The door of the ranch-house opened and Gypsy Farren appeared. Short, plump, muscular, pretty, her golden hair caught back, but in hopeless rebellion against restraint, she stood in the doorway, her hands doubled on her hips, the setting sun glinting with unreal richness from her hair and striking back blindingly from her spotless white apron. She smiled.

Blue Pete’s dirty Stetson swept off and dropped over the horn of his saddle. The breeze, curling down into the valley, tore loose a lock of jet-black hair and drooped it over one eye. A timid smile tugged at his heavy lips. Whiskers stood staring at the girl, seemingly entranced.

“Hello, Pete!”

“Howdy, Miss Gypsy!” He drew a hand clumsily across his lips and his throat worked nervously. “I—I jes’ come tuh tell yuh thar’s a bunch of Inverted T’s out back o’ th’ Muddy.” It had risen to his lips almost involuntarily, and, exhilarated by the speciousness of it, he added: “One th’ calves th’ coyotes er suthin’s got tuh.”

The girl’s eyes shifted momentarily towards the bunk-house.

“Thanks, Pete. Spud’s somewhere about. I’ll tell him.”

In her understanding way she knew the half-breed would not wish to pass the information on directly to the foreman.

She continued to smile at him. Whiskers had settled down to a stolen moment of foraging among the long grass beside the trail.

“Any news about, Pete?”

Blue Pete understood. But his face did not change. Though the transmission of news on the prairie was swift and surprisingly complete, and justified conversation at every meeting, there was more than casual curiosity in the girl’s question.

"I guess they don' pass on much tuh me, Miss Gypsy. 'Tain't none o' muh business wot's the news, sort of. Yuh shud otta git intuh town offner. Thet's whar yuh pick it up. But," his voice falling, and flushing with embarrassment, "thet ain' none o' muh business neither."

Gypsy ignored the semi-apology. She threw out her hands with a tragic gesture. "What time have I for gadding about into town, Pete—unless I let things go to pot here? Just the same, if only I could get away oftener——" She leaned her head against the side of the doorway, and a dreamy look came into her pretty blue eyes.

Blue Pete rubbed a hand across his lips once more and raised his own eyes reflectively to the sky.

"Wal, le's see. Nothin' much thar at th' Hat, 'ceptin' tha're still talkin' 'bout thet high-level bridge. Yah, an' mebbe they'll git 'nuff jack fer a perfeshnul baseball team. . . . An' th' railway's put up a high barb-wire fence across T'rontuh Street. An'——"

The girl stopped him with an impatient gesture. "Affairs at the Hat mean so little to us out here, Pete; you know that."

"Wal-l, thar ain' nothin' out here on th' prairie, 'ceptin' coyotes, an' cattle, an' hosses, an' punchers." There was a twinkle in his eye as he spoke, and he would not look at her.

"But you ride about so much, Pete," she protested, eagerness, impatience, and appeal crowded into her tone. "There must be something happening." She swept a graceful arm across the horizon.

And, since the part of the horizon covered by the movement lay to the north-west, Blue Pete understood better than ever.

"Shure, shure, I'm ridin' all th' time. W'en I git pas' thet I'm dead. Now, le's see . . . le's see. Mebbe yuh didn' know Lee Cutten's gittin' 'long fast 'th thet wire fence he's puttin' up."

His crooked eyes had swivelled round to her without moving his head, and he saw the colour rise to her cheeks and her eyes brighten. But she tried to laugh.

"Yes, dad's right up in the air over it."

"An' w'en th' cattle drif' up agin thet fence *they'll* be up in th' air—er suthin'."

"That's what dad says. But that's not Lee's fault. It's his property. He has a right to fence it in." Then, fearing her defence was too eager, she added: "Anyway, it isn't likely we'll suffer. Lee's farm is off in that direction; it's not the direction the storms usually come from."

"But ef Lee Cutten's goin' tuh——."

A squat figure in stiff leather chaps and a flaming red flannel shirt slouched round the corner of the house and stopped, legs set wide, hands caught loosely in a wide leather belt from which depended a filled holster.

"An'thin' yu want about here, Pete?" he drawled.

The half-breed gulped and was silent, and all the animation died from his leathery face. Nervously he wiped a hand across his lips.

"Me an' Miss Gypsy here was jes'——"

Gypsy stepped down from the doorway. "It's all right, Spud," she said, turning her back on him.

But Spud Taylor, foreman of the Inverted T, was not so easily dismissed.

"No, it's not all right, Gypsy. You know how your father feels about—about things." He glared at Blue Pete.

The girl walked firmly up to him, drawn to her full height. "And when father is not here, I give orders, not you. Please bear that in mind, Spud Taylor. At any rate"—relenting—"Blue Pete came to us to tell us of a stray bunch back of the Muddy. The coyotes have pulled down a calf."

Spud shrugged impudently. "They're bound to get one now and then." He strode deliberately around the girl and came to a defiant stand beside Whiskers. He

looked up into the half-breed's face with an insulting leer. "How the hell did you happen to be ridin' down there—back o' the Muddy?"

Blue Pete's eyes flickered uncertainly. "Jes' ridin', thet's all."

"You do a tol'able lot o' riding', don't yu? Look out yu ain't caught at it."

The inference was unmistakable, and Blue Pete's eyes steadied. Slowly he leaned forward until his face was close to the furious foreman's. "Th' ain' nobody tuh ketch muh, 'ceptin' th' Mounties—an' I ain' skeered. Wot tha're lookin' fer, Spud, is small-time rustlers. Got a fast cayuse, you, Spud?"

The foreman's face went brick red. "Why, you—you—what the hell d'yu mean?" A hand flashed from his belt to his holster, and a wicked-looking six-shooter appeared.

Gypsy sprang forward. But Blue Pete was in no need of protection. A big foot shot from the stirrup and upward. It caught the fingers clasped about the gun and sent it sailing in an arc against the brick wall of the house, where it dropped harmlessly to the ground. Before Spud could move to recover it the half-breed was out of the saddle, towering over him.

"Now ain' thet jes' too bad, Spud?" His voice hardened. "Yuh shudn't try nothin' yuh ken' pull off, boy. I'm apt tuh git real nasty an' hurt yuh."

Spud had stepped stumblingly away, murder in his eye; but he was afraid to turn his back. His left hand clasped the bruised fingers of his right where the half-breed's boot had landed. Black with fury, he turned to Gypsy.

"Yu seen that, Gypsy? Yu seen him kick me?"

"I saw it," said Gypsy dryly.

"He says I rustle. Yu heard him. I'd a right to shoot. The boss'll hear of this."

The girl's lip curled. "I'll make sure he does—my story, not yours. And I'll tell you now, if you'd

pulled the trigger, Spud, I'd have handed you over to the Mounted Police myself. Now get back where you belong—or perhaps I'll get nasty, too."

Thoroughly beaten, the foreman turned sourly away. Gypsy called after him:

"And dad will hear how complacently you hear of those strays—with a calf killed."

Spud sputtered back over his shoulder: "I knew all about them strays. Bill and Dusty was just goin' out to round 'em up. Feed's been poor north o' the Muddy, and some o' them new cows scattered th' other night." The sound of his own voice appeared to lend him courage, for he added viciously: "And some day we're goin' to find out what this 'breed's doin' ridin' about so much all hours. And the boss knows how we been losin' stock."

He disappeared around the corner of the ranch-house, struggling somewhat ineffectually to combine dignity with speed.

## CHAPTER IV

### TRAGEDY BY NIGHT

**B**LUE PETE rode slowly back through the gate, climbed the slope, and cut across the prairie towards the main trail to the south-west. As he rode he kept an eye behind him by means of the small mirror, for he knew Spud Taylor had no compunctions against shooting in the back. Once he did catch a swift glimpse of the peak of a sombrero in the long grass at the top of the slope, but it vanished almost immediately, and in a few moments he was out of range.

"Whiskers," he grunted, setting the pinto to its long lope, "you 'n' me's gotta hev eyes in th' back of our heads fer a w'ile now. Mean cuss, Spud Taylor." He sighed. "An' me! I near got muhself in fer suthin' thet time . . . jes' like I allus do. . . . Ornery cuss. . . . Jes' ain' got no sense." He patted the pinto's neck, which arched to the touch of his fingers. "Wish yuh cud talk, ole gal, an' call me things I desurve."

He rode on, Whiskers maintaining the tireless lope. It looked like her usual gait, but by sundry invisible movements of his knees Blue Pete had lengthened her stride, and the ground fell behind at a surprising speed.

For a quarter of an hour he clung to the trail, then, convinced that he was unobserved, he turned the pinto abruptly into a draw and disappeared.

By the rules of the game Whiskers was due for a rest, for since early morning she had borne her master fifty miles, the trip broken by several unsaddled rests, but

now there was no time. Her scraggy tail whisked about to remind Blue Pete that there was a limit, but that was the extent of her protest. Finally, after another couple of miles, all the time out of sight of the prairie above, the half-breed pulled up, dismounted, released the cinch, and dropped the saddle to the ground. The pinto snorted a few times, pawed at the ground, rolled over, then lay still, not even plucking at the succulent grass in the hollow where they had stopped.

Blue Pete climbed to the ridge and lay looking back along the trail, his sombrero on the ground beside him, his chin resting on his clenched hands. Suddenly he flattened into the grass.

Far back along the trail a pair of galloping riders had swung into view. For several seconds Blue Pete watched them, then, rolling back, ran to the pinto, saddled, and rode swiftly away. Keeping to the coulee and riding at full speed, he reached a branching depression and turned into it. After following it only a few hundred yards he pulled up and, dropping the loose reins that Whiskers might not wander, climbed to where once more he could follow the course of the riders whose coming had interested him.

Evidently satisfied that he had gained on them, he continued his way. And as he rode the silence of the prairie became broken. From somewhere out of sight ahead of him came the shrill bawling of calves, the lazier responses of their mothers. He dismounted and climbed towards the sounds.

Half a mile away a herd of perhaps twelve hundred cattle fed in a loose herd. From where he lay the ground dropped gradually towards them. The night-herders had come on duty, the ranchers of the district keeping a closer watch on the herds than was the custom, for of late the rustling, from which a ranch country always suffered, had increased to serious proportions. On the near side of the herd two cowboys were seated on the grass with a pack of cards, their



mounts ranging near them with hanging reins. On the other side a solitary rider sang sleepily to the herd.

A thousand times had Blue Pete looked on such a scene, and always it sent a thrill of nostalgia through him. For such a long time now it had meant so little to him. Once it meant so much—thrills, danger, the setting of wits against wits. The song drifted across the herd was a familiar one, and the half-breed unconsciously commenced to hum.

The sun was almost down, a mere half-circle of blinding red on the north-western horizon. In fifteen minutes it would be almost dark, with the startlingly sudden falling of the prairie night. The sky was cloudless, as it had been for weeks—weeks of unbroken glare so nerve-racking to the tenderfoot. Blue Pete made a swift estimate of the time he had till darkness fell.

Returning to Whiskers, he led her around, circling the herd, all the time concealed by the rolls in the ground. Then he went on alone. A slight perspiration had broken out on his forehead, though the chill of the prairie night was already noticeable. He breathed heavily as he went, muttering now and then.

"Thar ain' no other way I kin see. I gotta do it. Durn me, I talk too durn' much."

He had come around to the south of the herd. The card-playing cowboys were three hundred yards away on his left, the one on duty slightly more distant on the other hand. The calls, the light oaths, the laughter of the card-playing pair reached him distinctly on the evening air. In the growing darkness the faint glow of a carelessly lighted match—a dangerous act within sight of a bunch of cattle by night—located the third puncher.

Blue Pete had brought his rope with him. The cattle were settling down for the night, with gentle mooring and comfortable grunts. A draw rose gently from the coulee towards them and he followed it. His

attention was fixed on the fading light of the sky. He knew he must do the most difficult part of what he had to do before it became really dark and before the cattle settled down. To strike too soon would mean exposure, too late, a stampede; in either case failure. It must be light enough for the cattle to see him without alarm, but dark enough to cover his retreat.

He could see the herd now. And they could see him. The nearest—fortunately a cow and her calf—were fully fifty yards distant, and he could not get nearer without going into the open.

But he knew cattle, knew them as no one else on the ranges. Born in a cow country south of the Border, he had always lived among them, except for those few months when he rustled horses for the railway contractor four hundred miles to the north, and the few weeks he had spent in the Rocky Mountains in pursuit of a desperado the Mounted Police wished to decoy into their own territory from the inexperienced hands of the British Columbia railway police. There was little he could not do with horse or steer.

Fixing his attention on the calf, he slowly raised himself from the ground, his body bent, both to escape the suspicious eyes of the punchers and to excite the curiosity of the herd without sending them into a stampede. Several of the animals saw him and stood watching without fear. The calf and its mother were interested, but undisturbed. Without sudden, startling movements he commenced to squirm and twist his body and move his arms about.

Cattle, especially range cattle, are curious, so curious that it is dangerous for a man to be afoot among them even when they are not roused to anger. Pressed on by other curious cattle behind, they will trample an unmounted man to death without intent. Step by step the calf worked its way nearer. Behind it came its mother. Blue Pete continued his act, anxious lest the movement of the herd be too quickly read by the

herders. At thirty yards the calf pulled up and would not budge.

The half-breed dare not delay. Already the mounted cowboy was roused, for he shouted to his companions and commenced to ride nearer. The whole herd was interested now, their heads turned towards him. Risking everything, Blue Pete carefully examined his rope to see that the coils were free and, stepping forward, curled the rope over his head and launched it towards the calf. It dropped neatly about its neck. Instantly Blue Pete darted back out of sight. The calf resisted, but with a jerk it was hauled into the draw. The mother bawled frantically. The herd rose. The two card-playing cowboys had leaped into their saddles and were stringing off beyond the herd, singing as they went the night-herder's soothing melody.

Out of sight in the draw, the half-breed drew his knife, and the strangled cries of the calf ceased abruptly. With the carcass over his shoulder he made for Whiskers. He had little to fear now. His actions had so nearly thrown the herd into a stampede that the three punchers would be too busy close-herding them, with no time to give chase to him. Throwing the dead calf over Whiskers's rump, the pinto edging away at the smell of blood, he mounted and rode into the darkness.

The thud of the pinto's hoofs might tell a story, but he could not help that. All he had in mind was escape, and to forestall those two riders he had seen making for the Muddy, where the Inverted T strays were supposed to be.

Already it was complete night. Straight across the prairie Blue Pete headed for the Muddy. Once he dismounted and lay for a few moments with his ear close to the ground, and when he was in the saddle again he sent Whiskers on at a more rapid pace.

A small stream, flowing from the Cypress Hills, cut across before him, and with a sigh he sent the pinto splashing through it. A short distance beyond he

dismounted, lifted the calf to the ground, and, listening for a time, felt about in the dark for the brand. This he slashed with his knife.

Then, remounting, he sat for a time, his chin raised, his eyes closed.

From the darkness, not four hundred yards away, came abruptly the crazy howling of a pack of coyotes, a raucous, taunting, nightmarish cachinnation that makes the blood of the tenderfoot run cold. The coyotes could see him; and they had smelled blood. The sound ceased as abruptly as it had commenced as Whiskers moved away, though the pinto's light tread scarcely rustled the grass. A few moments later it broke out afresh from another direction. The coyotes were circling the dead calf, seeking a stronger odour.

And then it ceased once more, as abruptly as if a faucet had been snapped shut. A tingle shot through Blue Pete's veins. From away towards the Cypress Hills came the long-drawn howl of a timber wolf on the hunt.

The half-breed smiled contentedly. The carcass would be there in the morning, nothing but bones, for Bill and Dusty to find.

## CHAPTER V

### ENTER THE MOUNTED POLICE

IT was after eleven when Whiskers, with a low, contented whinny, loped down a long slope towards the unlighted, uncurtained windows of the 3-Bar-Y ranch-house. Blue Pete's eyes were bright, and, raising his head, he sent into the night the cry of the screech-owl.

The door of the ranch-house opened instantly, and a small woman was outlined against the lighted room behind.

"H'lo, Pete!"

"H'lo, Mira!"

That was all. The pinto greeted the woman with another whinny, but did not even slow down, and horse and rider were drowned in the darkness towards the stable. A dog barked. A light came on in another building, and a face appeared at the window, cupped against the light.

Whiskers loped on. Tired as she was, there was the routine—around the bunk-house and the two corrals, and back to the stable door, the tour of inspection that ended the day's work.

As Blue Pete dismounted, a cowboy, clothed only in trousers and oversize shoepacks, came yawning from the bunk-house, carrying a lighted lantern.

"H'lo, Pete!"

"H'lo, Chick! An'thin' happened?"

The immediate reply was a cavernous yawn. "Shure. Sun set las' night, come up this mornin', an' set agin to-night."

"How yuh not night-hawkin' to-night? Ain't yuh on?"

"Got a tooth kickin' up. Mick's out to-night. We been lucky, I guess. Ain't got to us, them rustlers, not yet."

"Wot's the missus say—'bout th' tooth, I mean?"

"Shooin' me off to the Hat to get it yanked. But, shucks, just when she said that the damned thing got sweet's pie. Goin' like all hell now. But Jake can yank it—or I'll tie it to Jill's heels an' tickle her."

Blue Pete was bent over Whiskers's legs, rubbing them down, the pinto, with twisted neck, taking the deepest interest in every move. The half-breed chuckled. Nothing but threat of a dentist would rob Chick of a chance to get to Medicine Hat. After a round of the bars—and perhaps a night in "cooler"—he would be ready for another month on the range—to collect his fifty dollars for another binge.

Chick stifled another yawn, not for politeness, but because the effort of opening his jaws was too much. "Oh, yes, I forgot. Shure, there's a few missin' from the east herd. Maybe just strays."

"Mebbe not," said Blue Pete. He had finished with Whiskers, and with an affectionate slap, answered by a playful nip in his direction, he sent the pinto trotting to her own box-stall. "Takin' chances feedin' so close tuh th' Hills."

"It's the best grass in the country now."

"Shure. An' the bes' fer th' rustlers—an' th' wolves." He set off for the ranch-house. "Take a run out thar muhself to-morrer. Thar's things happenin'—places. 'Night!"

As he picked his way through the darkness his steps lingered. Mira was waiting for him, and he longed for the sound of her voice, the love-light in her shy eyes. But in all their association he had never been

able to conceal anything from her—and he felt there were things that had happened that night which he would not care to discuss. Neither had he yet become accustomed to a roof over his head, the comfort of a ranch like the 3-Bar-Y; and never, he knew, would he face without misgiving and wonder the white wife he had so unbelievably won.

Years of homeless wandering, of living under the stars, of reckless lawlessness, and of flight from avenging authority, had tuned his mind and his habits—and too much his desires—to a very different existence. As Mira's husband, joint owner of one of the best ranches in the district, he frequently stood aside and marvelled—and pinched himself to make certain it was not a dream.

Mira was waiting for him. She had left the door open and was busy about the stove when he entered. She was small, black-haired, wiry, with a head held straight above straight shoulders, solemn-faced, as if life held worries she must bear alone. Every movement was swift and sure, with nothing of aimlessness about it, cool, decided. She turned for a moment and threw the half-breed a swift, anxious look.

"H'lo, Mira!"

"H'lo, Petel!"

Still nothing more. But each knew what the other felt and was satisfied. A moment or two later she asked: "Did you bring the mustard?"

Blue Pete stopped stockstill, his mouth wide open. "I plumb fergot."

She said nothing, showed no annoyance. He hung his sombrero on a wooden peg. He cleared his throat.

"Guess I fergot th' res', too," he murmured sheepishly.

Then, eyeing her expressionless back, he moved silently to the table and placed on it, beside the plate where she always sat, a brightly coloured scarf that had bulged his pocket.

When she came to the table with a plate of sizzling steak, fried potatoes, and canned tomatoes, her eye lit on the bright colours.

"That's—pretty," she said. That was all, but the look in her eyes, the stumbling words, satisfied him. Anything more would have embarrassed him.

He fell to eating, a little stiffly, though he was ravenously hungry. Nowhere more than at the table was the change the years had brought in his condition more sharply felt by him. It always made him awkward. Mira picked up the scarf and, going to a mirror, wound it loosely about her neck, leaving the ends hanging over one shoulder. Then she turned to face him, her eyes dancing. Blue Pete looked away. Neither spoke. With the scarf still about her neck she seated herself and picked up a sock she was darning.

"Stopped at th' Inverted T," Blue Pete muttered after a few moments. It came from him explosively, like a confession forced from him by something beyond his control.

"Oh? "

"Met th' Farren men on th' way tuh town. Jes' thought I'd look 'bout."

The casualness of the tone failed to deceive her.

"Looking ain't seeing," she said.

"Wal, I seen."

"What? "

He coughed and filled his mouth so full that speech was obviously impossible for the time being.

"Th' ain' nothin' too good fer th' Inverted T."

"Or too expensive," she added. "Gypsy's got ideas." She raised her eyes to the uncurtained windows.

It was a curious room. In an uneasy, restless way it combined the baldly utilitarian with an undirected struggle for decoration.

Born on the prairie, shortly after the railway reached



Medicine Hat, she had never known her mother. Out there, almost eighty miles from town, she and her two brothers had almost raised themselves. She could not remember learning to ride, to rope, to shoot, and her happiest moments were spent on the range.

When, cornered by the Mounted Police in a flagrant rustling venture, her brothers had shot themselves rather than be taken, she had, in a fit of furious resentment against the forces of the law, fled to the Cypress Hills and herself taken to rustling.

It was there she met Blue Pete, an outlaw like herself, driven to return to it by the heartless repudiation of his evidence by an ignorant judge. The pair, brought together by accident, when Mira had come on the badly wounded half-breed and had saved his life, had married in Montana. Later, reward for what Blue Pete had done for the Mounted Police, he had been forgiven, and with Mira had returned to the 3-Bar-Y. They had struggled to settle down like respectable ranchers, but the effort had never been quite successful; both were too fond of the open spaces, too resentful against discipline and restraint, to fit into the quieter life of ranch-owners.

It was a point they never discussed, never needed to. The difference between them was that, while Mira grimly persisted in finding a way out for them both, the half-breed fretted under the restraint and frequently broke away on long, mysterious rides.

In the course of Mira's struggle she had worked, fumblingly to be sure, to make the ranch attractive, more like such complete homes as the ranch-house at the Inverted T. Copying a suite of furniture she once saw at the Triangle H, imported with an Eastern wife, she had procured in Medicine Hat coverings which, by much amateur and rather ineffectual effort, she had succeeded in applying to two old hair-cloth chairs whose origin was forgotten. A drape of start-

ling tones hung over the doorway to their bedroom, and in a drawer, unknown to her husband, was now the makings of curtains for the windows.

Keenly aware of these fumbblings of hers, Blue Pete was wont to watch her from beneath his brows. He did so now, stirring uneasily.

"'Tain't no real ranch, thet Inverted T," he declared contemptuously. "Th' outfit ain' much good neither. Lookit thet Spud Taylor."

"What did Spud do to-night?" Mira enquired understandingly.

He had not intended to speak of that part of the evening's events, but there was no way out now.

"Oh, Spud he got sort o' nasty."

She raised her eyes and fixed them on him reflectively. "Just what did you go in there for, Pete?"

That was always the way—he could keep nothing from her. He grinned awkwardly.

"Jes' thought I'd tell 'em 'bout a bunch o' strays back o' th' Muddy."

"And there isn't?" she enquired.

He wiped a hand across his lips. "Wal, I hed tuh say suthin'." The foolish grin widened. "Tol' em' a coyote hed got a calf down, too. . . . Killed one o' our own calves an' set it thar so they'd fin' it all chewed up."

"What will the boys think?" There was no complaint, no suggestion of disapproval, merely a fear that his scheme might have miscarried.

"They didn' see muh. I was keerful."

"What about the brand?"

"I cut it up. Th' coyotes 'ud shure cancel it fust thing. They was all everywhere w'en I left."

Mira darned on. She picked up the second sock and started on it.

"Bound to get yourself into trouble, ain't you, Pete?"

"Thar won' be no trouble."

"Sometimes it don't work out like you expect," she reminded him mildly.

He swallowed the rest of his tea and wiped his lips noisily.

Mira sighed. "Just got to get mixed up in something, eh, Pete? Long time since anything happened, ain't it? . . . Got to happen soon or you'll bust out. . . . Too bad the Mounties don't seem to need you no more since the mountains."

The memory of that period of thrills, of taking his life in his hands, of a lone fight against terrific odds, of flying bullets where he dare not shoot back, of dodging the very law he risked his life to defend, of rubbing shoulders with the scum of the earth on railway construction where every man was a law unto himself, brought a gleam to his crooked eyes.

"Great li'l life thet was, Mira—fer both of us. Ef on'y it 'ud bin on th' prairie! I was skeered in them mountains."

Mira heaved a heavier sigh. "What's going to happen to the prairie when the ranchers have to fence the ranges?"

"'Twon' never be," he declared irritably. "Not in our time."

"All we need is a few more Lee Cuttens." The sock dropped from her hands, and a sad, dreamy look clouded her face. "No more riding . . . no more round-ups. . . . No more just not knowing—everything. . . . And maybe no more punchers. It won't be——"

Blue Pete's head jerked towards the door, and he raised a hand for silence. Suddenly the door opened and a Mounted Policeman slid through and closed it swiftly behind him.

They stared at the dull khaki working tunic, the wide-rimmed, low-crowned felt hat pinched to a peak, the blue riding-breeches with the yellow braid down the

outer seams. But they saw nothing except the grave face of Sergeant Mahon, standing there before them, his back pressed against the closed door.

"Put out that light," he ordered. "And Pete, I want to speak to you. We'll go outside."

## CHAPTER VI

### DON FARREN PROTESTS

THE buckboard ground noisily into the gravel roadway at the head of Toronto Street. After the soft soundlessness of the dusty trail it crashed the ears of the three Farrens. The bronchos, still galloping, scuttled down the cutbank, past the stand-tank, whirled around two corners, and set off down Main Street. But, as they neared the town hall, Don Farren, with an irritated twist of his wrists, drew them in to a sedate trot.

For Medicine Hat, cow-town, had arrived at the stage of growing pains, and it threatened to put a kink in the wide-open tolerance of earlier days. Civic laws had been passed that galled every self-respecting cowpuncher and rancher; and everyone knew the town lived on cattle. One of the ordinances covered the galloping of horses through the streets. Another frowned on the shooting out of the natural gas lights and the roping of startled and indignant matrons by playful punchers.

Fond hopes. But Don Farren had no thought on a day like this of defying them. And so he passed down Main Street with a dignity befitting the mission on which he was embarked. Past the "city" hall, with the *News* office across the street, past Samond's general store and a cluster of real-estate offices, across South Railway Street and the railway track beyond, with a heavy freight train rumbling with shrieking brakes down the cutbank across the South Saskatche-

wan, preparing for the curve to the bridge, and a flourishing halt before the dull Mounted Police barracks immediately across the railway track.

Don Farren climbed out.

"And," he announced, giving voice to the thought that had never been out of his mind, "we're stopping at the Alberta and leaving early in the morning. Horry, you look after the team. You'll have your hands full, Andy, getting all that stuff Gypsy wants. The shops close at eight. Supper at the hotel at eight. I'll meet you in the lobby—or on the veranda."

Without waiting for a reply he turned and strode into the barracks.

Andy pursed his lips after the retreating back and climbed slowly down.

"How about changing places, Horry?"

Horry shook his head. "Dad knows what he's doing. Got to do something to keep you from jumping about like a flea. Best get a hustle on; you've got a big list there."

With a twitch to the reins he sent the bronchos whirling about, the low front wheel curling back beneath the buckboard, leaving Andy to trudge disconsolately across the railway to Samond's store.

Within the barracks, seated behind his flat-top desk with the stained blotter strewn untidily with smoking-tobacco that had oozed from a rubber pouch, Inspector Barker saw the buckboard pull up right before his eyes. With a shrug and a sigh he brushed the scattered tobacco to a heap and crammed it back in the pouch.

An orderly knocked and entered.

"Mr. Farren to see you, sir."

The Inspector made a wry face that twisted one spur of a tightly waxed moustache almost to his forehead. "Take him and toss him into the river, Langley," he

whispered. Then he grinned and straightened his shoulders. "Show him in."

Don Farren stumped into the untidy office. A heavy scowl lined his rugged face, and his chin protruded belligerently. His big black sombrero was pushed far back on his iron-grey hair, adding to the grimness of his appearance. Obviously Don Farren had a grouch.

"Hello, Farren! Push those spurs on the floor and sit down. Haven't seen you in a month. What's the matter—things been running smoothly at last?"

It riled the rancher, and his scowl deepened. "Damn' sight better if I never had to see you at all," he growled.

"For you or for me? Unless we require it, you don't need to come, you know."

Farren crashed the spurs far away across the floor and flopped into the chair. There was a look of disgust on his expressive face, as if spurs on the seat of a chair offended him.

The Inspector rose lazily and recovered the spurs. He stood balancing them in his hand, looking down on them.

"Ever see these before, Farren?"

He held them out. Don Farren glanced at the spurs contemptuously. Then his eyes focused on them and widened a little. Swiftly he looked away.

"Why should I have seen 'em?" he snarled. "Why should I see 'em now?"

The Inspector tossed them in the air and caught them. "Oh, no reason whatever . . . if they're strange to you. Sergeant Mahon found them, that's all. It happened to be near the Hills. Thought you might help us find the owner."

Farren grunted. "So the Mounted Police are so busy hunting out owners for trifles that they neglect their real duty!"

"But finding owners is our duty—with other

things!" The Inspector returned to his rickety swivel chair, dexterously retaining his balance as he sank into it.

"If you paid more attention to the other things, we ranchers would have less to complain about. No one would be better pleased than I if I never had to come into this place."

The Inspector was undisturbed. "In that case we'd miss your graphic opinion of us."

Don Farren thrust his chin farther forward. "Don't try to be funny. Wait till I'm through."

"You mean you've got a real joke for me?" enquired the Inspector with assumed guilelessness. "All right, let's have it."

Don Farren's eyes had slanted away for a moment to the spurs where they lay on the corner of the desk. They were large, with elaborately etched silver buckles, one of the many ornamentations on which cowboys sometimes waste their earnings. But the Inspector sat silently waiting, and with a start the rancher realized it.

"If you got after the crooks about this country, if you put them where they belonged, I wouldn't be here."

Inspector Barker swung his chair about and gazed for a significant moment through the open door that led to the cells at the back of the barracks. It may have been meaningless or it may have had a world of suggestion. Don Farren must have thought the latter, for his face reddened with anger.

"God damn you, Inspector, you know there's rustling going on. Why the tarnation hell don't you do something about it?"

"I am. I'm listening to you grouse. And now and then we catch up with a rustler—and that's the last you hear of him. But this is a cow country—and where there are cows and ranchers there's bound to be rustling."



He looked straight into Farren's eyes as he spoke, and the latter flushed.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

The Inspector lolled back in his chair, his elbows on the arms, the tips of his fingers pressed together. His eyes were on the ceiling. "Let's see. The last two rustlers we sent to Lethbridge were ranchers—like yourself. But what I mean more particularly is that there can't be rustling where there's no stock to rustle. The trouble is that I've too small a staff to watch every maverick on the ranges—and you know how simple it is to alter a brand and spoil our evidence."

"I know how damned silly it was to think you could use a 'breed who's rustled all his life to help you out. You discovered what the courts think of that."

"I discovered," corrected the Inspector coldly, "what one judge thought of it. We're discovering a lot of things about that judge. When a maverick gets into the wrong herd, what can we do about it, Farren? Even the bawling of its own mother wouldn't convict you."

"Convict—me?" gasped Farren.

"I speak in general terms."

"Of course, of course. We all know how difficult it is to trace the origin of a stray calf."

"I'm not convinced that many ranchers try to trace it," said the Inspector dryly.

Don Farren braced himself. "This isn't a matter of strays. It's rustling, and in bunches. The Inverted T's been losing both cattle and horses."

"You haven't reported it."

"We waited to make sure they weren't just strays. But a couple of nights ago they cut out a bunch almost under our noses. One of the boys had his horse shot under him—broke its leg. They cleared out towards the Hills; that's where they all make a getaway. It isn't the strays—the mavericks—that worry us. You can't keep them all in the herd."

Inspector Barker's eyes twinkled. "I guess you'll have to fence the ranges, Farren."

The rancher seemed to swell with indignation. "There are too damn' many fences now. That God-dam' fence of Cuttens—the one he's putting up right now—imagine a farmer in a cow country—that's one fence too many. When a steer gets up against that barbed wire——"

The Inspector started. "Did you say barbed wire?"

"You bet I did. He's using barbed wire as the top strand. But that isn't what I came to talk about—not now. It's the rustling. What are you going to do about it?"

The Inspector rose and paced about the office, casting sharp glances at his visitor.

"You realize, of course," he said, "the territory I have to cover with my small staff. It works out at about six thousand square miles a man; and it happens that the herds range over the most exposed part of it. Damn it," he exploded, "if only we could punch a few weeks' training into those Montana sheriffs—if we could even get them to co-operate—we might do something. As it is, about all they do is get themselves in magazine stories and the picture papers with ten-gallon hats, dinner-plate badges, and a battery of small cannon strung about their fat guts. Why, damn it, they even have women sheriffs over in that country! And the rustlers, working in the dark over here, have only to skip across the Line, right under their noses. Either those ten-gallon hats blind them, or the guns are worn to protect the boodle they get for seeing and doing nothing."

He smiled a little sheepishly and dropped back in the chair. "Oh, well, that's off my chest. The picture-book sheriffs probably satisfy their consciences with the reflection that it's Canadian stock and the good old U.S. is getting something for nothing. That's the worst of elected officials who must be politicians above

everything else." It was an old sore that never had a chance to heal. "Tell me, Farren, did your punchers follow the trail?"

"There wasn't one to follow. We'd been feeding over that section for weeks. Anyway, it's not our business to chase rustlers. What the hell does the country pay you chaps for?"

He was working himself up once more to a fine fury, and he shifted angrily forward in his chair, a bony fist extended.

"Look here, if the country doesn't pay you enough to do this job, I'll chip in out of my own pocket. There's five thousand dollars for the one who captures these rustlers, dead or alive."

"That would buy a lot of cattle and horses."

"Damn it, don't I know it? But it would pay. Lord knows how long it's been going on—how long it will continue. Anyway, I want that rustler."

The Inspector tilted his head and smiled cunningly into the irate rancher's face. "Want him that badly, do you?"

"You're damned right I do."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

Farren turned his head away towards the fly-specked window. "Never mind who I suspect."

"Of course, you know the Mounted Police can't take your money for doing their job. But five thousand!" His eyes twinkled. "I suppose you'd be glad to make it ten if we could fasten it on Lee Cutten?"

For a moment or two Don Farren struggled to muster a look of righteous indignation. But it was a failure, and it ended in a frank laugh.

"Well, I don't mind admitting it would be worth a lot to us ranchers. What in hell does a farmer want to come butting into a cow country for, anyway. This isn't farming land; it's range country, and nothing in heaven or hell will make it anything else. Why doesn't someone knock it into this Lee Cutten's

head that this is semi-arid land—just a land of bunch and buffalo grass, and that's good for nothing but stock. Look at him." He was getting warmed up to the subject. "Sixty miles from nowhere, with a nice-looking sister in a miserable homestead that must make life hell for her. He can't make farming livable, let alone profitable, out there. Yet, look, there's all that money going into fencing. Damn near a thousand it'll cost him to fence that section in. And he's got a tractor for ploughing. And the latest is a cream separator. God!"

The Inspector nodded. "Yes, I understand both he and his sister have money."

"Well, he hasn't brains."

"He came for his health, I believe."

"I hope to God he doesn't find it. Why, if farming gets started in this district it'll play hell with everything. And," menacingly, "we ranchers have a right to protect ourselves."

"Just what do you mean by that, Farren?" asked the Inspector.

"Well, Lee Cutten's apt to get hurt. He'll find his health better elsewhere."

"And there," declared the Inspector grimly, "you've touched another of our duties. No, Lee Cutten won't get hurt. Bear that in mind, Farren."

Don Farren saw that he had let his tongue run away with him. "When a herd drifts up against that barbed wire, nobody can blame a puncher for getting peeved. You know what might happen then."

"I know what won't happen, if I can prevent it, so long as Lee Cutten obeys the law. And when he doesn't, we'll attend to him, not you."

Don Farren rose, kicking his chair back.

"That's no matter. What you've got to do is find that damned rustler. And that five thousand stands, and I don't care who earns it. Good day!"

Inspector Barker watched the tall figure stride across

the railway tracks and swing into South Railway Street.

“ He doesn’t care who earns it, eh? Well, there’s only one man in this patch of country can do that. . . . And won’t you howl if he does, Don Farren? ”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MOUNTED POLICE CALL

THE tall muscular figure of the irate rancher had scarcely vanished around the corner into Toronto Street when Inspector Barker leaped to his feet. Pausing before a cracked mirror to make certain that the waxed points of his moustache were in shape, he took his cap from a hook and went out, leaving word with Langley that he would not be gone long.

In the shadow cast by the high cutbank across the river he passed swiftly across the tracks, up Main Street, turned to the left around the *News* office and, reaching Toronto Street, swung left again and dropped down towards the Alberta Hotel. It enabled him to reach the telephone exchange without passing the always crowded hotel veranda. He entered hastily. Three girls were seated before the switchboard, metal bands over their heads. The Inspector stopped behind the nearest.

"Get me Eagle Butte hut, please," he ordered, "and quick about it. And"—leaning across the counter to shake a finger in the girl's face—"when you put me through, take that headgear off your pretty hair. No listening in. I'll use this first booth where I can keep an eye on you."

The girl laughed impudently. "Okay, Inspector, but I'll make a note of it for your wife. Don't you find it expensive to keep an establishment out there?"

"Sure do, Bright Eyes," grinned the Inspector.

"So expensive I don't plan to keep another in town—if that interests you."

"Bumped again!" sighed the girl. She manipulated some plugs, listened, then removed the headgear.

"Your man, Inspector. Go to it."

The Inspector was already in the booth. He closed the door. Outside, the girl winked at her companions. "Must be an Indian uprising—or a murder. I'm going to agitate for more privacy for us girls."

The Inspector emerged.

"Need a doctor out there, Inspector," enquired the girl, "or is it too late?"

"Too late for you to nose in, little girl." He laughed, winked, and went out.

And so, something like four hours later, Sergeant Mahon, stationed at Eagle Butte, dismounted above the bottom where the ranch buildings of the 3-Bar-Y lay, hobbled his horse with the reins, and crept through the darkness to the ranch-house.

Ten minutes after he had left the darkened room Blue Pete returned. Mira, who had remained in the dark, relit the lamp and searched his face anxiously. He said nothing as he slouched across the room and dropped in his chair against the wall. Still without speaking, he took out a blackened corncob pipe and fumblingly lit it, and a thin line of smoke drifted to the ceiling.

Mira sighed. "When do you go, Pete?"

An apologetic smile flickered across his face. "Th' Inspector's astin' fer muh."

"When are you going?" she repeated dully.

"Right away."

"What does he want you for?"

"Sarjunt didn' say."

A quick frown passed across her worried brow. "But you know. It's the rustling."

" I dunno."

" You going? "

" I gotta."

" You wanta," she corrected, a little bitterly.

Blue Pete rubbed the back of his hand across his lips. " Ef th' Inspector needs muh."

" If he didn't you'd eat your heart out here. Oh, well! "

She rose, gathering up the mended socks and carrying them to the bedroom. He could hear her moving about inside. In two minutes she was back.

" Your clean things are in there on the bed. I'll get something ready for you."

He rose clumsily and started for the bedroom. " I ain' doin' nothin' here," he offered shyly. " I jes' don' fit in—nowhar, I guess."

" I married you," she told him, her lips tightening.

" I ken' help wonderin' why."

" Y'always was a bit foolish, Pete," she said, with a smile as shy as his own.

Presently he was back in the sitting-room, buckling his steel-studded belt. She handed him a parcel in a waterproof cover. He took it, regarding her enquiringly.

" Wot's this? "

" Something to eat—dried meat and things. You'll forget to eat if you don't have something with you."

He weighed it thoughtfully in his hand, not looking at her. " I'll be takin' Whitey."

" Whiskers'll be mad."

" She's did eighty 'n' a bit more sence four this mornin'."

" So've you."

" Gor-swizzle! " he laughed. " Goo'bye, Mira! "

" Goo'bye, Pete! "

He passed out into the night. A few minutes later the dull thud of Whitey's running hoofs passed the



ranch-house. Mira stood before the window, her face flushed, and waved blindly into the night.

In all his life Blue Pete could never remember when riding in itself wearied him. Fatigue came only from loss of sleep and lack of food. More in the saddle than anywhere else, he had once ridden for two days without a rest, snatching sleep in the saddle, stealing horses as he went along. It was the horses that gave out. On Whiskers's back he slept almost as comfortably as at home, and the little pinto, sensitive to her rider's every condition, smoothed her stride that he might not be disturbed.

More than eighty miles in the saddle since morning, and little less before him now, with not a wink of sleep and only the half-hour's rest at the ranch, yet he had no thought of protesting against the call to duty. He dare not sleep now, for he did not trust Whitey. At the police hut at Turner's Crossing a fresh mount was waiting for him.

But the thought of action did not excite him now. It was not weariness that made him droop over the horn, head bent, shoulders hunched miserably. And now and then his great tousled head would shake, and his body twist uneasily. Only once, as a pack of shrieking coyotes sent their raucous cries into the darkness from back of the Muddy, did he raise his head with his customary alertness.

He was worried. Inspector Barker wanted him—and he thought he knew why. Not that he was afraid—he had never felt more than the pleasant thrill that goes with fear—and it had nothing to do with his position in the district. No one suspected that he still worked with the Mounted Police. Never since that painful scene in the court-room, when the judge had refused to hear his evidence, had the Inspector dared to employ him openly. That suited them both, for it gave the half-breed a freer hand, and an approach to

situations that were denied an official. Always before he had welcomed these assignments—"details" the Mounted Police called them—for they meant the excitement for which his nature craved. But this time everything was different.

Shortly before one o'clock—he had ridden fast—he dismounted, flung down the reins that Whitey might not stray, and betook himself to a little height less than two hundred yards away. The night was chill, as all prairie nights are, and the cold was less on the higher levels. There he threw himself down on his back, his hands locked beneath his head, and lay staring at the stars.

Time passed. He had almost forgotten where he was and what he had set out to do when, from the trail below, came the sudden beat of fast-moving hoofs.

Leaping to his feet, Blue Pete started down the slope.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BLUE PETE IN ACTION

A FEW swift strides, then he dropped flat to the ground and lay listening, striving at the same time to catch a movement against the lighter sky beyond the trail. The broncho fast fading to the south was, he knew, Whitey. It was too late to do anything about that.

He knew what had happened, knew it with a quickening of his heart that sent him gliding through the grass, his .45 in hand. With the reins hanging loose a horse could scarcely move about, let alone gallop like that. The reins, then, must have been gathered up and fastened by a human hand!

And he, Blue Pete, the half-breed, whose very life for years had hung on his vigilance, his animal cunning, his alertness to everything about him, had lain there on the grass and felt nothing, had heard nothing! Dreaming, drowned in the picture of trouble more distant!

He was alert enough now, and he knew he must be careful. He could see nothing, and for a time he heard nothing. His inclination was to rush forward and face whatever and whoever it was, to pit wits against wits. But the memory of his mission surprisingly hung heavily over him, holding him back. This was no time to embroil himself in a disturbance, even there where he would be justified in anything he might do.

And then his ears made out the creak of leather. A horse moved—a second. They commenced to trot. A taunting laugh was flung into the night.

They had waited for him, then, expecting him to attack. And when he did not come they knew he was warned.

Instantly he was on his feet. He knew where he was. Three miles away as the crow flies was the Inverted T. In the long, easy stride of the Indian he commenced to run, elbows tucked close to his sides, ankles and knees and hips loose against the invisible roughness of the ground.

"Gor-swizzle!" he muttered. "They've started dang soon."

The thrill of it sent a new brightness to his eyes, a surging of the blood in his veins. A broad grin spread over his face. Then he sobered. He remembered that he must be in Medicine Hat not long after daylight. And the fresh mount at Turner's Crossing was fifteen miles away!

Dark as it was, he ran straight as an arrow, slipping over the rolling ground like a shadow. Away to the east a pack of yowling coyotes kept pace with him, breaking into a clamour of curiosity, then silent, awaiting the answer that never came.

As the miles passed, the half-breed's breathing scarcely quickened, and only a slight perspiration broke out on forehead and upper lip.

He reached the wire fence about the Inverted T and felt his way along it to a gate behind the corrals. Below him a light burned in the bunk-house, and a tingle shot through his veins. A light at half-past one in the morning! He smiled and nodded.

Suddenly the silence of the night was broken by a laugh from somewhere behind him. Blue Pete slid a few yards away and lay down against the fence. Two riders were approaching. His quick ear counted them readily enough; and he knew it was the pair that had laughed back at him from the trail as Whitey's hoof-beats faded into the distance towards home. They thought him stranded now there on the prairie. They

had cut across from the trail in order to avoid passing the ranch-house, where Gypsy might have heard.

One of the riders laughed harshly, explosively.

"Aw, shut yer trap, Dusty," snarled his companion.

But Dusty was too full of chuckles to restrain them. "Sho', Bill, sho'. I'm a real mean hombre. By golly, I cain't help larfin' thisaway. Cain't yu-all savvy the joke? I see them long, curved laigs hoofin' it tharbouts 'way back to the Three-Bar-Y."

"How do we know he mightn't sashay this way?" queried Bill uncomfortably.

Dusty laughed. "Not that bird. He savvies he might git a dose o' lead in the dark about the Inverted T. Spud 'ud like the chance. . . . Wish we'd hog-tied him. He's mean, that bird. Spud's gotta keep his eyes skinned."

One of them dismounted and opened the gate, and they rode through, silent now. Blue Pete rolled under the fence and followed.

He had come more or less aimlessly to the Inverted T, having little more in mind than that it was the nearest ranch, and that there would be horses there. Now that he was there he realized that Dusty had spoken the truth—he scarcely dare make himself known at night in such a place. And how else could he obtain the horse he had to have? Spud Taylor would only laugh in his face, and a request to Gypsy would require an explanation he was not prepared to give.

To help himself was equally unpromising. To take a broncho from corral or stable was certain to create a disturbance that would bring swift vengeance before he could hope to get out of range.

And yet he must have a horse.

He followed the riders down the slope. Before the bunk-house they dismounted. At the same moment the door opened and Spud Taylor was outlined against the lighted room at his back.

"That you, Dusty?"

"Sho' is, Spud." Dusty burst into subdued laughter and the two men went close to the foreman and commenced to talk together. In a moment Spud was laughing with them.

Blue Pete had not been idle. Working his way around the far side of the two bronchos, he glided nearer, concealed by their bodies from the light that came through the open door. He had his eye on the nearer horse. Its four white socks flamed in the rays of the bunk-house lamp. It heard him and turned its head. Blue Pete stood still, holding his breath, then moved steadily nearer. He reached it and laid a gentle hand on its side, while the other gathered up the loose reins.

Then with a leap he was in the saddle, his great spurs striking cruelly into the broncho's sides. As if fired from a gun it was off. For just a fraction of a second it seemed about to buck, but it recognized the hand of a master and lay low in a burst of speed.

For several incredulous seconds the trio in the doorway stared after the receding hoof-beats, then, as instinctively they reached for their guns, a bullet whanged past them into the lintel of the doorway.

Spud Taylor leaped back and sent an answering shot blindly into the darkness.

And from away near the ranch-house came a triumphant "Yip-ee!"

Exultant, reckless now, Blue Pete drew the rifle from the saddle-holster and, turning, sent a bullet crashing through the bunk-house window. "Yip-ee!" he shrilled, the blood tingling beneath his scalp.

The door of the ranch-house opened. He heard it and swung wide away from the trail. A rifle-shot whistled past his head, and he ducked low over the horn. The trail gate opened readily, and he did not stop to tug at the rope that closed it.

"Gor-swizzle!" he growled. "An' the bes' gal 'th a shootin'-iron this side a circus—nex' tuh Mira." He made a sound of disgust. "Me a 'tective! Me!"

He did not follow the trail, but cut across the prairie to the main trail, with unerring sense of location and direction, pushing his mount hard. He needed all his time now, for he had lost an hour between his over-long rest and the race to the Inverted T. He would need to ride hard all the way to Medicine Hat.

In an hour he neared Turner's Crossing. The Mounted Police hut was only a quarter of a mile away when a thought suddenly occurred to him and he pulled up so abruptly that the horse stumbled.

"Gor-swizzle!" He pushed back the dirty Stetson and scratched his head.

How would he account to Constable Simmons for the horse he rode? The brand was there for anyone to see—and, anyway, Spud Taylor was certain to follow. He hadn't thought of that. Surely, under the circumstances, he had a right to borrow the horse, but would the Mounted Police think so? They were touchy about things like that. With them two wrongs didn't make a right. Besides, he was ashamed to admit that Dusty and Bill could play such a trick on him. Come to think of it, how could he prove to the Inspector that they had done it at all? All they had to do was to deny it. Then there were those crazy, swagging shots he had fired into the bunk-house.

In such moments Blue Pete had no delusions about himself. He realized his propensity for getting himself into trouble—and getting the Mounted Police into it, too. The wild, undisciplined, reckless life he had always led sooner or later overcame his common sense and he was sure to break loose in some fool adventure like this. He had given up hope of ever altering that.

There was, for instance, the incident when, despatched in pursuit of a notorious rustler, he had trailed him across the Border into the Badlands, had overtaken him, roped him with his own lasso, and had lugged him all the way back to the barracks in

Medicine Hat. Even now he failed to understand the Inspector's consternation when he told his story. Even now it made his eyes blaze to remember how the rustler, immediately set free, had laughed in his face and swaggered away across the railway tracks.

He had had some satisfaction when, in a private feud of his own, he had followed the rustler pell-mell to the very Border and had shot it out with him across that imaginary line that limited the jurisdiction of the Mounted Police and had sent him crawling off into Montana, his horse shot from beneath him, and a second bullet in his thigh.

It had, however, taught him a lesson—he liked to think. So that when he had been sent later far from his beloved prairie to round up a bank robber and gunman and entice him from the British Columbia side of the Rocky Mountains back into Alberta, where the Mounted Police might lay their hands on him, he had followed the rules so closely that only Mira's unexpected intervention had saved his life. But even that did not mean that there was not much about the way he played the game there in the mountains that it was well the Inspector never knew.

Now, with a stolen horse between his legs, he faced a situation that, for a few moments, appalled him.

There was one way out, and he had no time to devise a better.

Leaving the trail, he dismounted, caught the reins over the horn of the saddle, and with a smarting slap of his quirt sent the white-stockinged broncho racing back towards the Inverted T. Even in the darkness he imagined he could see those four white legs twinkling along the back trail.

Constable Simmons, prepared by telephone from Medicine Hat, was up and waiting, a fresh mount tied to the hitching-post before the hut. He stared when Blue Pete came striding through the night, his quirt tucked under his arm.



"Why—why, Pete, where's the little pinto?"

"Dreamin' wot good li'l cow-ponies dream, I hope," grunted the half-breed. "This my hoss?"

"But how did you get here? Where's your mount?"

Blue Pete snuffled and looked embarrassed. He rubbed his chin and grinned.

"Whitey piled muh back thar."

The policeman tried to see the swarthy, down-turned face, but the light was too bad. "Tell that to the Inspector. He doesn't get much to laugh at these days."

Blue Pete sidled nearer and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Say, mister, don' yuh tell nobody. Jes' le'e it out. I ain' tellin' nothin' I don' need tuh. An' don't you."

"All right, all right." The Mounted Police had learned long since that, with the half-breed, it was better not to pry too far. "Better get going or you'll be late. You'll find Sport a pretty good substitute for Whiskers."

It was almost six o'clock, with the sun standing well above the horizon, when Blue Pete reached the cutbank surrounding the valley in which lay the town of Medicine Hat. Through its heart ran the railway, dropping down the western cutbank beyond the river, turning sharply to cross the wide flow by a long, thunderous bridge, then disappearing to the east into the gorges that cut the cutbank at that side of the town. The town itself was situated almost entirely on the south side of the railway, with only the Mounted Police barracks, the hospital, an abandoned woollen mill, and a few cheaper homes on the north side where the spring floods often covered the flat bottom.

Already a certain amount of life was abroad—milk-wagons, a dray or two, a small movement about the railway depot—and the half-breed stopped to consider. There were only two crossings of the rail-

way, and, after a moment's reflection, he cut across the prairie, concealed from the town by the cut-bank, and dropped down by the little-used trail to the east.

A long freight train, drawing out from the depot on its way to Dunmore Junction, rumbled across the street as he reached the railway, and held him up, engineer and fireman waving a greeting to him as the engine slid past, panting heavily to gain speed for the climb beyond.

Circling far to the north, following the curve of the river, where the scattered houses as yet showed no sign of life, Blue Pete rounded back past the hospital and reached the barracks. An orderly was on the look out for him, holding the gate to the high-fenced corral open. It closed behind him, the fence concealing him from the street.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE INSPECTOR GIVES ORDERS

ONE of the trials of Inspector Barker's official association with Blue Pete was his recognized inability to meet him on equal terms. Not that the Inspector was a snob—that he was impressed with any sense of superiority. Thirty years on the prairie, from long before the railway reached Medicine Hat, had knocked from his head—if it had ever been there—any thought that all men were not to be treated as equals. Close association with Indians, half-breeds, and the outlaws of a dozen nations, under conditions that bred a fresh outlook on life even in the most conventional, had kept him too busy to stand on the ceremony of class distinction. Besides, should he ever feel inclined to indulge a feeling of superiority, there was always the tenderfoot to despise.

In reality, in the company of the half-breed the trouble was that the Inspector was oppressed more with a sense of inferiority. He recognized the half-breed's cunning, his skill with things that mattered in the West; and behind those ridiculously crooked eyes, beneath that thick, straight black hair, he knew, was an uncanny self-sufficiency, a stubborn refusal to be misled by the duller understanding—in matters connected with their mutual dealings—of the most pompous and dictatorial official he might choose to imitate. The very effectiveness of the half-breed was based on methods beyond the imagination of

the Mounted Police. The fact that sometimes his methods were also beyond the law increased the embarrassment of their association, but only in extremity altered their relationship.

Usually so self-sufficient himself, so decisive and swift in his judgments—as he needs must be where he was sole arbiter, and decisions must be made quickly—when facing Blue Pete the Inspector sometimes felt like a child learning a new game. But one thing that he had learned to accept with more or less equanimity, not only about Blue Pete, but about the Indians in general, was that no white man could hope completely to understand them, the corollary being that to judge them by white standards was only to stir up unnecessary trouble.

With Blue Pete there was the added puzzle of certain "white" restraints and ambitions imposed at unregulated moments over the cunning of the Indian. It provided a situation the Inspector wisely forebore to analyse too definitely. All he wanted was results—of course, combined with methods that, if known, would not get him into trouble with headquarters at Regina.

But that treatment, that acceptance, of Blue Pete did not alter the fact that he always expected the unexpected. At times it made him indulgent of the half-breed's idiosyncrasies, at other times it irritated him, partly because his pride tried to convince him that, with his experience, he should be able to understand anyone in the West.

The difficulty lay in the fact that Blue Pete's half-breed strain had escaped the usual taints. He had never known his father, and his Indian mother was little more than a dream. But there did linger a dim memory of isolation in infancy, of a silent, protective woman who kept him away from the tribe, a gentle guardian who held her head high. Probably it was this isolation that protected him from the vileness, the grossness and brutality, of too many of his kind,

while leaving him its cunning, its daring, and to some extent, its lawlessness.

And so killing with him had never been murder, and danger, even for no purpose, was attractive. It explained why, indeed, he was apt to break out, at the most inopportune moments, in undisciplined and embarrassing lapses that gave Inspector Barker many sleepless, worrying nights. "White" in so many ways, Blue Pete was always the half-breed.

Nevertheless, troublesome as he might be at times, and always uncertain save in his loyalty, the Mounted Police could not well do without him in that cow country. For them Blue Pete had accomplished the impossible, had single-handed brought to justice criminals beyond the strategy and persistence even of the tireless Mounted Police. His cunning, his stamina, his understanding of the criminal mind, had served them well. And his methods of accomplishing what the Inspector gave him to do worried the official less because he was forced to recognize that only by those methods, denied to the Mounted Police, could results satisfactory to the law have been attained.

At the same time the nature of those methods made it more and more necessary that Blue Pete's association with the law be concealed. That in itself constituted another problem.

Inspector Barker had not dared to go home for the night. A restless, futile effort to sleep on the lumpy, worn couch in his office had left him wide-eyed for the orderly's knock.

Blue Pete swaggered into the untidy office. His leather chaps creaked a little, for he moved with unaccustomed sway, the result—and the wise old Inspector recognized it—of some new and unintelligible uneasiness. The official rose, yawned, mumbled a greeting, and sank into his swivel chair.

It was not a perfect yawn. Assumed at the last moment to cover his own concern at this new manner

of Blue Pete's, it faded away in a tell-tale limpness. He pushed the tobacco-pouch across the blotter, and the half-breed helped himself absent-mindedly, his fingers lingering over the scattered shreds. The fact was his eyes had alighted on the showy spurs with the silver buckles that lay near the back corner of the desk.

The Inspector noticed the direction of his gaze. "Ever see them before, Pete?"

The half-breed started, and his eyes flew uneasily to the Inspector's face and dropped away.

"Them spurs?" he queried indifferently. "Sort o' gorjus, eh? Used tuh see 'em over in Montany. Texas mostly, they was. Go with studded saddles 'n' all thet. Knew a cowman oncet wot hed his saddle all giddled up in gold an' silver, with dimings, too. An' th' saddle-flaps an' th' horn looked like wot yuh see sometimes in a jool show. Cost a fortune, I guess."

He sat up and faced the Inspector.

"Yuh was wantin' muh, Inspector. Wot fer?"

But the official mind had flown for the moment far from the purpose of the visit. The half-breed's manner puzzled him more and more. He jerked a thumb towards the knobbly couch on which he had tried to snatch a night's sleep.

"No better than the floor, that thing. I must pick up a more comfortable one some of these days. But I wasn't sure how soon Sergeant Mahon would find you, and I didn't want them to call up the house. Then when the Sergeant got me on the phone, I wasn't sure when you'd arrive. I don't wish anyone to see you here if we can avoid it."

He paused long enough to light his pipe. The burnt match he flipped into a corner.

"Saw you in town yesterday—no, day before yesterday," he mumbled over the stem of the pipe as he sucked the spark fiercely to bring it to a glow. "You must have covered a lot of ground since then."

"Tol'able bit," agreed Blue Pete. He watched the Inspector closely.

"Where's Whiskers? At the Crossing, I suppose? I knew you'd never be able to——"

"I ain' aimin' tuh kill th' old gal yit, not by a long shot I ain't. She'd hed 'nuff. Lef' her at th' Three-Bar-Y. Mind you," he added proudly, "she cud 'a' did it awright. Thar 'ain' nothin' th' ole gal ken' do."

The Inspector nodded his head dreamily and placed his elbows on the blotter, looking through the spotty window before him.

"I saw you over at the Royal day before yesterday," he said. He turned slowly and threw a disapproving glance at his visitor. "You've been around that hotel a lot in the last few weeks. Don't forget I'm sitting right here most of the time; I can see everything."

"Yuh'd see a durn' sight more ef yuh was over thar," replied Blue Pete, with a grin. "Gittin' tuh be a real bum, I guess."

Theoretically the Royal Hotel was out of bounds to everyone official—to everyone with a reputation to maintain.

"When you get that way, Pete, you'll be no use to us. . . . You know the gang you rub up against over there can't do you anything but harm. You can't touch coal without staining your fingers."

"An' yuh ken' git tuh th' felluh under th' coal 'thout techin' th' coal—no ways thet I know of." He raised one great hand before his eyes and turned it curiously about. "Guess I bin techin' coal most o' muh life. Mebbe I'm plumb loco, but I sorta got th' idee ef yuh wanta keep yer fingers clean yuh jes' nachully gotta keep outa th' Mounted P'lice."

Inspector Barker laughed. "But it's our business, Pete."

"An' now 'n' then it's mine. . . . But mebbe I dunno wot muh business is. Jes' feelin' 'bout: thet's Blue Pete."

Only Mira knew the half-breed better than the Inspector, unless it was Sergeant Mahon—knew the lonesome life he led, the ostracism that faced him on the prairie. There were times when the Inspector's heart bled for the big, simple fellow with the awkward habits and the crooked eyes and the wild background, but there was little he could do about it. He had some conception of the fact that the work he now and then gave the half-breed was the utmost he could do.

"What are you feeling about for over there at the Royal, Pete?"

The half-breed stared at the floor. "All sorts over thar. . . . Most o' them wusser'n th' others. Felluh 'th eyes open kin larn a lot. Mounties might want it some time."

The Inspector placed a friendly hand on his knee. "I wouldn't expose you to what might happen over in that place, Pete, if they ever learned you worked for us."

"Oh, I'm aw right." His eyes fixed on the hand that gripped his knee. "Over 't th' Royal a half-breed ain' wusser'n a rattler, anyways."

The tinge of bitterness, of pathos, in tone and words struck the Inspector hard; never before had he heard Blue Pete protest against his treatment. He tried to laugh it off.

"Well, I defy them to teach you anything worse than you know already."

Blue Pete shook his head. "I dunno. Larned a new un las' night. They got muh——"

He stopped, and his crossed eyes rose and fell in blushing confusion.

"Why, what happened?"

The half-breed made a sound of disgust. "Gor-swizzle! Never larned tuh hold muh tongue, I ain't." He sighed. "I'm jes'—jes' 'n outlaw—every way. . . . Someun stole Whitey 'mos' from between muh legs. Whitey's th' cowpony I was ridin' in."



"Stole it? Why, how could they?"

"Givin' him a breathin' spell, an' I guess I musta purty near gone tuh sleep. Anyways, some smart cowhand come 'long an' set him loose. An' me lyin' out thar, jes' starin' at th' sky. Gor-swizzle! Mus' be gittin' soft." He punched a big fist disgustedly into the crown of his sombrero and promptly straightened it.

"But I don't see. . . . How did you get here?"

The half-breed's face stiffened like a mask. "Wot I nachully ken' stand 'bout th' Mounties is th' durn questions tha're allus astin'. I'm here, ain't I? . . . Mebbe I jes' dreamed thet 'bout Whitey. Mebbe I jes' stole Doc Grange's car agin. Thar's a p'lice cayuse out thar in th' corral. You ain' los' nothin', an' I ain' kickin'. Whitey'll fin' her way back. . . . Ef she don't I ain' aimin' tuh call no Mounties tuh fin' her. Now, whachu wan' muh fer?"

It was only another of the many occasions when Inspector Barker considered it wise to pry no further.

"Have you been missing any cattle from the Three-Bar-Y lately?"

For a moment or two Blue Pete did not reply. "Wal, th' boys do say as thar's bin a dang' lot o' strays—er—suthin'. . . . But we're not bad's th' Lazy M, I guess, an' th' Double X, an' th' Circle J. Yes, an' th' Triangle H."

"That, with the Inverted T, pretty well covers your section out there, doesn't it?"

"Shure. That's wot I mean. Seems like thar's a lot o' hot-footin' gittin' intuh th' cattle these days. Mebbe it's th' calves—same's th' kids Mira reads 'bout in th' papers."

"Kids nowadays are the same everywhere, Pete, I guess. You don't need to go farther than the Inverted T, or the Cutten place. It looks as if things might get livelier out there any day."

Blue Pete slowly repacked his pipe with a powerful thumb. "I dunno. Guess they don' mean no harm."

"Don Farren's been here complaining about the rustling."

"Yah?" Blue Pete's eyes were on his pipe.

"That's why I sent for you."

"I ain't got nothin' tuh do 'th Don Farren. Don' wanta hev nothin' neither."

"All right, think of it as the Lazy M, or the Circle J—or your own Three-Bar-Y. It only happens it's Farren has done the howling. He put it squarely up to us to get busy."

Blue Pete shook his head. "Le'e me out, Inspector. I ain' no frien' o' Farren's. . . . Besides, I guess Mira needs muh 'bout th' Three-Bar-Y."

The Inspector regarded him anxiously. "She doesn't need you as much as we do, Pete." A wave of annoyance sharpened his tone, for Blue Pete had always hitherto jumped at these assignments. "What the hell's the matter with you to-day? This is exactly along your line. Don't make excuses. If you do, I'll demand to know why—and I don't think you'll want to answer that," he added cannily.

"Listen, Pete. For some reason you don't want to take this on, but are you going to let Don Farren jeer at us? Are you going to pass up a big job like this?" He leaned forward and searched the half-breed's face. "Are you telling me you're through with the Mounted Police, Pete?"

The half-breed started. Then with a sigh he knocked the ashes from his pipe into his hand and clambered to his feet.

"Guess yuh know yuh got muh thar, Inspector. But it ain' fair, it ain' fair. Wal, wot yuh wan' muh tuh do?"

## CHAPTER X

### A HALF-BREED FRIEND

THE clock on the town hall was striking the quarter-hour when Blue Pete rode unobtrusively from the police corral and turned north towards the more thinly populated part of the town. Retracing the route by which he had come, he reached the railway track on the eastern side.

A few signs of life were visible about the scattered houses, but no attention was paid to him. A couple of dark-skinned faces peered for a moment around a clay angle in the cutbank where the railway disappeared towards Dunmore Junction, and Blue Pete feigned not to notice them, though he had seen them before they saw him. Up the grass-grown trail he went, turned to the right across the prairie above the cutbank, and entered the town again by Toronto Street. This he followed to South Railway Street, where the railway blocked further advance. Swinging to the left, he proceeded across Main Street and turned in at the stables of the Royal Hotel. And as he crossed before the barracks he touched his hat as if by accident.

The Royal Hotel was a two-story frame structure that almost filled the short length of South Railway Street between Main Street and the river's edge. Not more than thirty feet from its western wall the South Saskatchewan, a quarter-mile of rushing torrent, blocked the street. Beyond the river was nothing but the cutbank and the bald prairie above. Long ago the hotel had been painted blue, but time and

weather had faded it to a dirty bluish grey that befitted its reputation.

For the Royal Hotel placed few restrictions on its patrons. Within its grimy exterior gathered cowboys on their periodic orgies, and ranchers whose appetite for liquor bore no restraint. They knew that, incapacitated, they would at least have a bed to sleep themselves back to sobriety—and no one the wiser outside the hotel.

It was a gold-mine to its owner, a rather mild-mannered woman. Drinking was ample and prolonged, but never beyond the available cash or credit; and the dining-room was satisfactory in service, and cheaper than any other hotel in town. Somewhat withdrawn as it was, and on a blind street, it could afford to ignore even the limited restrictions that handicapped the other hotels—the American, the Cosmopolitan, and the Alberta. Along its front ran the railway. And the fact that across the railway was the Mounted Police barracks, with Inspector Barker there to see everything that happened on the street, exercised little restraint, since the local police were jealous of their authority and resented any interference with their badly performed duties. They worked on the principle that nothing better was to be expected of the Royal.

"All sorts over thar . . . most o' them wusser'n th' others" was as concise and accurate a description of the Royal patrons as could have been given.

His horse stabled, Blue Pete lounged around to the front of the hotel—for fear the Inspector might suspect something furtive about his movements—and entered. No one was in sight in the lobby, and he leaned carelessly over the little counter and scanned the shelves of tobacco and cigarettes on the wall behind. An ink-stained register that few ever used lay closed beside his elbow, and he opened it to fill the time.

Presently a heavy footstep came pounding down a

stairway somewhere out of sight at the back of the hotel, and presently a harsh voice broke the sleepy silence:

"Here, you, what the devil you doin' here? Clear out, and make it slippy. We don't want yer dad blowin' off around this place lookin' for you. . . . Hear me?"

A sleepy, drunken, high-pitched voice whimpered protest. Then a pair of heels dragged across the floor as the protest grew louder.

Blue Pete stepped back to where he could look along the hall that cut the building in two. As he did so, a door opened and a burly, red-haired man, coatless and vestless, his shirt open at the neck, backed into view, dragging behind him a smaller man in hairy white chaps, who struggled to keep his feet.

Blue Pete stepped noisily forward. The bartender looked around.

"Here, Pete," he called irritably, "take this young soak and drop him over into the river—or something."

The "young soak" straightened and shrugged himself free. He drew his vest down and straightened his hairy chaps.

"If I drank any more of that damned poison you sell here for whisky, Reddy," he declared, "I'd drop myself over and never know it. Get away. I can navigate." He recognized the half-breed. "Hello, Petel Yip-eel!"

It was the cowboy call for help, and Blue Pete responded.

"Aw right, Reddy," he said, "I'll look after 'im. H'lo, Andy!" He seized the young man's arm. "Suthin' tuh eat—fer two, Reddy," he ordered.

"Shure. It'll be in the dinin'-room in a jiff."

Still holding Andy's arm, Blue Pete directed him into the dining-room and placed him in a chair at a table. Into another chair he dropped. Andy Farren looked him over in a puzzled way.

"Didn't we meet you riding out yesterday, Pete? Or is that part of the blind?" He dropped his head on the table. "Lord, I hope it was yesterday."

"Shure was, Andy. I fergot suthin' Mira ast muh tuh buy, so I hed tuh come back."

The bar-tender entered, bearing a bottle of pickles. With a wink at Blue Pete he set the bottle on the table. "Cook'll have the chuck in a coupla minutes. How yu feelin', Andy?"

The boy groaned. "Rotten."

"Oh, you'll be all right in a shake." He winked at Blue Pete and retired.

The half-breed dug two large pickles from the bottle and dropped them on Andy's plate without a word. Another he bit into and chewed ravenously.

"I'm plumb holler inside," he said.

Andy picked up one of the pickles and bit into the vinegary green. "Lord!" he gasped as the stinging acid struck his tongue.

Blue Pete nodded approvingly. Diving into the band of his chaps he produced a pair of ornate spurs with chased silver buckles and placed them on the table. Andy stared at them, his mouth open.

"Where—where did you get them?"

The half-breed pursed his lips. "Stole 'em. . . . Th' Inspector was plumb curyus 'bout them."

"They—found them? Where?" Andy was almost sober.

"Ast yerse'f, Andy. I dunno. I jes' know they was curyus."

The eyes of the young man fell away, and he picked up the second pickle.

"Heroic measures," he said, examining the piece of poisonous green remaining in his hand. "I guess it's the only way." He looked about the dining-room. "A hell of a place for dad's son. . . . Wonder how the devil I got here?" He leaned his face on his hand.

"What the blazes do they put in their drinks in this hole, Pete?"

"More'n you kin stan', boy."

A pimply-faced waitress appeared, buttoning her apron, yawning frankly. She took her stand beside a hole in the wall, cut through to the kitchen, and watched the pair at the table with an understanding smile.

"Had a night of it, eh, Andy?" she jeered. "Where'd you sleep?"

The young man flushed. "Thank God you don't know," he said and turned his back on her.

The waitress stamped to the table and slammed before them two well-filled plates.

"Whar's th' mustard?" demanded Blue Pete. "An' coffee so strong it 'ud put yer hair back nachurl."

The girl found the mustard. It showed the trail of a hundred knives, but that was to be expected. Cups of black coffee followed. Neither of the diners so much as glanced at her.

Andy drank a long gulp of coffee and smiled wanly. "You sure know the recipe, Pete."

"Shure. Now 'n' then I stumble on a durn' fule."

Andy reddened. "Oh, I'll be all right. If only dad doesn't get curious——"

The door shot open, and Don Farren walked in.

## CHAPTER XI

### A DISTURBED BREAKFAST

THE huge figure of the rancher filled the doorway. The fury that boiled within him seemed to swell him to almost unrecognizable proportions. His face was purple. For several dramatic, scourging seconds he stood there, half incredulous, indignant, almost insane with anger, staring from one startled face to the other.

Andy coughed behind his hand and straightened his shoulders. Across Blue Pete's face flitted a crooked smile, and his hand fumbled at his lips.

Farren strode into the room and came to a halt close behind the half-breed's chair. Into the anger and indignation that blazed from his eyes came a shade of uneasy bewilderment.

"How the devil did you get here?" he demanded of Blue Pete.

The half-breed's knife, bearing a slippery section of fried egg, continued safely to his mouth. "Jes' like I allus do—on a cayuse. How 'bout you?"

The bar-tender came nervously and obsequiously into the dining-room, rubbing his hands together. Don Farren represented a type of patronage the Royal could scarcely hope for. He bowed and pointed to one of the vacant chairs.

"Set in, Mr. Farren," he invited. "On the house."

With no more than a glance of utter contempt Don Farren waved him away.



"Since when, Andy, have you taken to selecting your friends from the Royal Hotel?"

Andy wiped his lips with the remnants of the paper napkin he had torn to ribbons in his nervousness. "I—I thought I'd take a walk before breakfast. I was passing the hotel here, and I smelled the bacon. Besides, I—I like their coffee."

"It's disgraceful that you know what their coffee's like. . . . I'm astonished that you're sober enough even to make excuses. I can't imagine you're in a condition to recognize the company you're in."

Blue Pete heaved his great body slowly from the chair. There was something ominous and deliberate about it, and Don Farren stepped quickly back. But the half-breed paid no attention to him. Picking up his plate, he moved to the next table and seated himself.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Didn' think Don Farren ever raised a lad who'd be lef' tuh pick his company. Too bad th' brains ran out so soon."

The rancher's hands dropped over the vacated chair and gripped it until the knuckles showed white.

"It looks as if someone must pick for him. I've a higher ambition for son of mine than to mix with rustlers."

"Then it's no wonder he wanders 'bout so much from home," replied Blue Pete. "Sort o' hanker tuh know wot yuh call a rustler, mister. Mebbe I got it wrong, an' it don' cover pickin' up strays 'n' mavericks an' brandin' 'em 'th th' Inverted T. Funny the Mounties mus' be wrong 'bout it, too."

Don Farren swallowed again and again, as if his fury choked him. Andy sat with bowed head, trembling.

"The Mounties have all they can do, and more, keeping track of you, Pete—only they don't do it," he said, when he found his voice. "If they did, there might be more profit in ranching."

"Don' know nothin' 'bout yer profit, mister," said Blue Pete, buttering a slice of bread on his hand, "but w'y git th' Mounties after me? I wudn' ef I was you. They'd be shure flabbergasted ef they seen wot I see. But," lazily, "I ain't tellin' 'em nothin'."

"Tell them all you damn' please. I've just been telling them there's five thousand dollars for anyone who gets this rustler who's been rustling our stock. And it's dead or alive—preferably dead. And I don't care who earns the money. Perhaps that will make you think twice."

"Shucks, I never do. Durn' waste o' time. Knew lots o' durn' good men stopped tuh think twicet. Tha're wearin' wings now—I hope."

The rancher stepped nearer, a leer on his face.

"You talk big, Pete, but I know you were at the barracks this morning. I know it now; I didn't believe it."

For a moment the half-breed was in a panic. But he gave no sign of it.

"So it's you got 'em after muh, eh? An' you're plumb curyus, too. Wal, th' Mounties didn' git nothin' outa me . . . an' neither will you." He leered up into Farren's face.

"Perhaps some of us ranchers will be able to tell them a few things." The rancher turned his back and faced his son. The young man had, in his nervousness, drawn one of the silver-buckled spurs from his pocket. Don Farren's eyes fixed themselves on it, growing wider and wider.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

Crimson flooded into Andy's face, and he crammed the spur back in his pocket.

"I—I—why, they're my spurs. You know them, dad."

"I—believe—I do. I saw them only last——"

He pivoted slowly on his heels towards Blue Pete.

And suddenly a short laugh burst from him. But he stifled it quickly, and his hand fell heavily on Andy's shoulder.

"Come along. We'll get out of this place. It's fit only for 'breeds and drunks."

"Mebbe," drawled the half-breed, "ef yuh ast nice we'd let yuh in."

The pair disappeared, Don Farren with a snort, Andy with a shamefaced glance back at Blue Pete as the door closed. The bar-tender came slinking in. The half-breed was chuckling over his plate. The bar-tender tried to laugh with him.

"A bit hot under the collar, the old boy, eh?"

"Gor-swizzle, I kep' muh hand on th' coffee-cup tuh put out th' fire, 'case he broke intuh flame."

"Oh, his bark's wuss'n his bite."

"Ef it wasn' I'd lose a leg ever' time we meet."

"Well, you'll never lose a leg about the Royal, Pete."

In the town Blue Pete came into his own. There he had attained something of the proportions of a superman. They had seen him at broncho-busting contests, and they knew him as a wizard with a wild horse, a lasso, and a six-shooter. More than once he had good-naturedly provided an exhibition of his skill, not swaggeringly, but because he liked to be friendly. And his modesty, his fearlessness, and his earlier Mounted Police work had combined to weave about him a glamorous mystery only enhanced by his lawlessness of the earlier days. Small boys would creep along at his heels, awed by his two-inch spurs, his bowed legs, his lurching gait, his dirty chaps and Stetson, and even by his crooked eyes.

The Royal had nothing against him, though many of its clientèle would have protested had they thought it would do any good, and in spite of the fact that his only contribution to the hotel coffers was for an occasional cheap bag of smoking-tobacco.

Blue Pete shook his head thoughtfully. "Don' yuh go countin' too much thet he won' bite. He ain' skeered o' nobody, Don Farren ain't—'ceptin' mebbe hisse'f . . . 'n' th' law." He rose, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Wot's th' chuck bill?"

The bar-tender waved a generous hand. "Oh, that's all right. You got me out of a mess. It's on the house this time."

"Not by a durn' sight. I ken' think o' nothin' thet tickles muh like settlin' fer Don Farren's chuck 't th' Royal." He chuckled.

The bar-tender joined him, his laugh ringing through the room.

"Damn it, that's a good un. What a story for the boys: Blue Pete standin' treat for Don Farren at the Royal! Say, it'll be a howl."

Blue Pete moved grimly towards him. "An' ef I hear 'em howl—ef yuh w'isper it—why, I'll jes' nachully cut loose an' wreck the place. An' you, too, Reddy. You hear?"

Reddy heard and promised fervently to say nothing. "But why the devil——"

"W'y? 'Cause it's too good a joke tuh share. It's my fun, not yours, Reddy."

He reseated himself and drew out his corn-cob pipe. The bar-tender disappeared.

A few minutes later three minor ranchers entered and seated themselves near the door. They paid no attention to Blue Pete. They were in a jovial mood, early as it was, having already sampled the liquid at the American. They were speaking of Don Farren, and the half-breed kept his ears open.

"Tell you what," said one, a clumsy, loose-lipped man who had not removed his sombrero, "we ought to chip in and add a few thousand to Don's reward. We might get a real clean-up of this rustling for a reward like that."

But the suggestion met with no favour, and after a

brief silence they commenced to speculate on who the rustlers might be, and how they worked.

The waitress entered, and the rancher who had first spoken, turning to face her, noticed Blue Pete. He dropped his head and whispered to his companions, and four pairs of suspicious eyes slewed round. The half-breed continued to smoke peacefully.

"Five thousand's a nice slice of kale," laughed the first rancher in a suddenly loud voice. "Almost pay a rustler to give himself up and collect. How about it, Pete?" he called across the room.

The half-breed started, as if he had heard nothing.

"How 'bout wot?" he growled.

"Don Farren's offering five thousand for the capture of the rustlers. Ever think of collecting?"

Blue Pete rose lazily, knocked his pipe noisily on a plate, and started for the door.

"Not me. Wot'd I do 'th fi' thousan' bucks? Got a good cowpony, a good six-shooter, an' 'nuff tuh eat. 'Bout all a puncher needs, ain't it?"

"Well, I could do with it nicely," said the rancher, with a wink at his companions.

"Wal, mebbe nobody cud collect easier," Blue Pete drawled. "W'y not 'fess up an' divvy?" He went out into the lobby and closed the door.

## CHAPTER XII

### A BAR-ROOM FIGHT

AS he emerged into the lobby he was caught in a rush of exuberant cowboys. Starting out on a carouse, "yip-ee"-ing and jostling, they paid no attention to the half-breed as they surged towards the bar-room, blinded a little, too, by the comparative darkness of the lobby after the bright sunlight outside. The room was packed with leather and sheepskin chaps, jangling spurs, varied sombreros and shirts and kerchiefs. There in the heart of the town not a gun was visible, though every self-respecting cowboy carried one as a part of his attire. More or less, the innocent appearance of their belts was their way of ridiculing the restrictions supposed to be imposed by town life. In reality nothing would have been said or done to them had they ringed themselves around with six-shooters.

Blue Pete was startled and bewildered by the flow of reckless gaiety that caught him up and sent him stumbling back towards the bar-room. He might have fought against it, but that would only have forced him to their attention. That he did not care to face, since, while the punchers seldom interfered with him, having learned the danger of it, he was as unpopular with them as with the cowmen, their bosses. He hoped that, in the scramble, he might find a way to escape.

In that he was disappointed. As they swirled into the bar-room, eager for the first drink, his towering

figure could no longer be ignored. He saw their eyes focus on him, but that scarcely worried him until a familiar voice cut through his smiling acceptance of his helplessness.

"The 'breed! What the hell?"

It was Spud Taylor.

Blue Pete's grin widened, but not with increased amusement, and his crooked eyes flickered about on the faces turned to him. Apologetically he commenced to edge towards the door, rubbing the back of one hand across his lips.

But that retreat was blocked. Spud and his two companions of the early-morning incident had already taken a few nips at the American and were in no mood to lose the opportunity that appeared to offer. They lined across the doorway, a nasty look on their faces.

Blue Pete was wise enough not to make an immediate issue of it. He stopped, lounging back against the wall, smiling more broadly. His big, brown hands were caught negligently in the band of his chaps, and those fluttering eyes fixed themselves on nothing in particular.

Spud pushed up before him, his legs planted wide. He was with men of his own kind, and he thought he could count on them.

"Now, you blasted 'breed, where's that horse?"

Blue Pete blinked innocently. "Yuh mean th' cowpony yer boys ran out on muh back thar las' night?"

"We never run no cowpony out on nobody. You know what I mean—that bronc of Dusty's you stole from the Inverted T, you horse-thief."

"Horse-thief" is a fighting word in the West, and the cowpunchers, sensing an excitement even more potent than the liquid refreshments of the Royal bar, stood and waited, ranged in a half-circle about the pair.

Blue Pete continued to smile, but the smile had stiffened. Spud addressed himself to his friends:

"D'yu know what he done? The damned rustler jumped Dusty's bronc right in front of the bunk-house and vamoosed, hell-for-leather, right before our eyes."

A bow-legged cowboy with a long moustache, the oldest member of the group, haw-hawed scoffingly.

"Shore he didn't steal it from under yu, Spud? "

Spud merely glanced in the speaker's direction. "We was standin' in front of the bunk-house, Dust an' Bill an' me. They left their horses standin'. We didn't know the 'breed was anywhere near."

"Easy as that? " drawled the teasing puncher. "What'd yu do when he run off—bolt for cover? "

"Not by a damn' sight. But it was too dark to do a thing; it was after midnight."

"Keepin' late hours for just punchers, eh, Spud? " laughed another cowboy. "How come? "

"None o' yer damned business." Spud's anger was mounting to the point of recklessness at the teasing of his friends. "And," he added, whirling on the first speaker, "you mind your damned business, too, Fitchy."

"Oh, shore, shore. Fella jest gets curious, that's all—with all this rustlin' goin' on."

For a moment Spud glared at him, but decided to make no retort. "If you want to know, Dusty an' Bill had been out to pick up some strays. They was just come back. I was waitin' up for them."

Blue Pete had not moved a muscle. He continued to lounge against the wall, his feet crossed, his hands in his belt, as if the affair was no concern of his. Nothing in manner or expression revealed the blazing fury that raged within him. A horse-thief, was he? He knew what he had to do. But he restrained himself for the time being. There were in the group ten



punchers and, though they were ready to tease Spud, in a fight they would range up beside one of their kind. To break out might mean death—for someone; surely a disturbance that was the last thing he cared to face with the Inspector still on his mind. Strange that the picture of the Mounted Police restrained him at such a tense moment. The puzzle of it did as much as anything else to hold his hand.

Fitchy recognized the tension, and he was a sane old fellow. With a fling of his hand he turned to the bar.

"All right, Spud. You've said it. Now let's liquor up. If yu got to ask questions, leave 'em till we've wet our whistles. The 'breed ain't got Dusty's cayuse in his chaps. He ain't runnin' out on yu neither, not if I know him. My treat."

But Spud was in no mood to be deflected from his purpose. He knew that if they started to drink his chance was gone. Besides, Blue Pete's apparent indifference, almost contempt, roused every tiger instinct in him.

"I'm askin' the questions right here and now. An' they're goin' to be answered. Where's that horse you stole, you horse-thief?"

At the same time his hand shot to his belt and produced a gun.

It was not the first nor the hundredth time Blue Pete's nonchalance had been misunderstood. Before the muzzle of Spud's gun had so much as lifted from the floor, he was looking into a black hole before the half-breed's hand. The movement had been so swift that it was scarcely visible.

Fitchy heard the shifting of feet and turned.

"Yu dang' fool, Spud! Yu shud otta know yu got to catch that 'breed asleep before yu draw on him—an' yu can't be too sure o' them eyes o' his even then."

The brittle laugh that followed must have been

wormwood to Spud, but for the moment he was helpless.

Blue Pete did not hear the laugh. All that rang in his ears was "you horse-thief!" He had forgotten every restraint now: the picture of Inspector Barker was wiped away as completely as if he had never known the Mounted Police. With a deceptively lazy movement he detached himself from the wall. He still smiled, but the stiffness of the smile was not to be misunderstood. In two steps he stood close before the discomfited foreman, running his eyes over him with a contempt that made Spud almost risk a quick shot.

"Shure a dang' fule, Spud," drawled the half-breed. "Never larn, do yuh? Felluhs like you shudn' never tote a six-gun. Ef they do they shud larn tuh use 'em."

His free hand shot out. It caught Spud's wrist and wrenched the gun away. Then, thrusting both guns in the band of his chaps, he stood, hands on hips, glowering down on the helpless foreman.

"Wish yuh was man-size, Spud. But yuh called muh a mean name, an' yuh thought yuh'd git 'way 'th it. Called it twicet—jes' twicet too offen. Twicet too offen ef yuh hed th' hull Inverted T outfit behind yuh."

Reaching out, he jerked Spud forward, caught him about the waist, pinioning his arms to his sides, swung him from his feet and once above his head, some of the nearer cowboys ducking to safety from the foreman's flying feet, and heaved him straight at the nearest window.

With a crash as if the building were tumbling down, Spud went sailing through, carrying glass and frame with him. Went with such force that he crashed against a wall eight feet beyond, and dropped out of sight like a rag doll.

Dusty and Bill had been too close to escape those

flying heels. They were sent hurtling over a table laden with glasses. Blue Pete had not even noticed them. But, as the shattered glass still rattled, they were on their feet, guns out. The half-breed's back was to them, his attention on the window through which his tormentor had disappeared.

For a fraction of a second his life wasn't worth the broken glass.

But Fitchy was on his toes, old hand that he was. With a leap in startling contrast to his languid manner, he landed before the threatening guns. His own guns were out, one in either hand—and Fitchy was a dead shot under any conditions.

"Put 'em up, boys," he purred. "This ain't no murder; it's a square fight, an' the loser takes what he gets. Shootin' in the back—two to one, too—it don't go with old Fitchy."

The two guns facing him wavered and slunk out of sight. Fitchy slipped his own away.

"Dang' fools, the whole caboodle o' yu. Y'otta know better'n block the door when a fella wants to git out. Goin' now, Pete? Well, ta-ta! An' when yu meet up with Spud next time, keep yer face to him. All right, boys." He waved them to the bar. "It's likkerin' time."

Blue Pete pushed him aside and approached the bar.

"Sorry, Reddy. I bin hankerin' tuh break loose fer so long I guess I plumb fergot whar I was. Coupla tens square things?" He drew a roll from his pocket and peeled off two bills, dropping them on the counter. Then, without another word, he lounged from the room.

Fitchy watched him go, whistling through his teeth.

"Whar the hell does he git his raw meat from, eh, boys?" He grinned. "Great li'l town, the Hat. Always somethin' happenin'."

Reddy picked up the two bills and looked them over. Then he waved both arms invitingly.

"All right, boys. It's on the house. Name yer p'ison. . . . But first maybe somebody best go out with a basket an' gather Spud up."

## CHAPTER XIII

### " A HOSS-THIEF "

OUT on the street, with the sun blazing on the faded brown front of the low Mounted Police barracks, a groan burst from Blue Pete's lips. With hanging head he slunk around to the stable and saddled his horse. That it was a Mounted Police horse made him feel meaner.

" Me a 'tective! " he sighed. " Me! "

The life of the streets proceeded normally; nothing of what had occurred in the bar-room of the Royal Hotel had carried to the outdoors. Where Spud had fallen was in a narrow opening between the hotel and an empty shack close to the edge of the river. No one appeared to have heard the crash of the glass.

As the half-breed emerged from the stable yard, a Mounted Policeman passed down Main Street, swaying lazily to the movements of his mount, crossed the railway tracks, and climbed down before the gate of the high-fenced corral. Blue Pete looked after him enviously.

" That's them. Allus th' same. Know wot they want, an' they keep on till they git it. No fulin'. . . . Me? I'm allus the same, too—jes' a half-breed! "

He cantered up Main Street, his head shaking dolefully.

Miserable, ashamed of himself, he reached the top of the cutbank. As the distant line of the Cypress Hills came into view his sagging body lifted a little. Suddenly a startled look came into his eyes, and un-

consciously he drew the horse in, to sit staring with unseeing eyes before him.

"Called muh a hoss-thief! . . . A hoss-thief! . . . Called muh a hoss-thief!"

With a jab of his spurs he sent the horse leaping forward. But after a time the pace slowed, and he rode thoughtfully along.

"Now whar th' tarnation'd thet cayuse git tuh? Four w'ite socks—I'd spot it in muh sleep."

And as he went on, blind and deaf to everything about him, he kept repeating:

"Called muh a hoss-thief, he did. . . . Now whar th' tarnation—— A hoss-thief!"

An idea seemed to strike him, for he turned quickly in the saddle and scanned the trail behind, the prairie on either side, the stretch right away ahead to the Cypress Hills. Then, more briskly, as if he had come to a decision, he struck his calves briskly into the sides of his mount and broke into a fast lope.

At Turner's Crossing he exchanged the horse for another. But to Constable Simmons's questions he was dumb. In three minutes he was off again, the Mounted Policeman regarding his retreating back with a puzzled frown. Then he went back to have a word with Inspector Barker by telephone. He told of Blue Pete's arrival on foot in the early morning.

It was the first the Inspector knew of it, and it brought a sigh of apprehension that did not carry along the wire.

"What's the worry?" he enquired, trying to laugh. "You know Blue Pete."

Inspector Barker did not himself know the half-breed—that was the trouble—but there was much in their association that he had never revealed to his subordinates.

For a time Blue Pete kept to the trail, riding fast. Two small groups of cowboys passed, making for the

town, but to their half-hearted " howdy's " he returned only an absent-minded grunt.

He had left Medicine Hat before nine o'clock, and as the sun sank he drew from the trail and dismounted in a coulee through which a stream ran in the spring-time. Along the rocky, dried-up bed grew a few stunted cottonwood trees. The 3-Bar-Y ranch was only a few miles away. There, shadowed by the riding bank, he lay almost in darkness and considered, but the prairie above him would not be dark for another hour.

From his pocket he drew a piece of paper, and with a stub of pencil began painfully to write, his tongue rolling from side to side of his open lips, and his fingers clutching the pencil desperately. Mira had taught him to read and write, but he had made little use of either, partly because in his mind it represented too distressfully the new life into which he had been thrown.

With darkness the coyotes came out. They knew he was there, the uncanny brutes, and their hideous howling skirted about him enquiringly in the darkness.

He rose, mounted, and rode towards home. Above the bottom where the ranch buildings lay he dismounted, hobbled the horse, and went forward on foot. The two windows of the living-room in the ranch-house were still alight, though it was after ten o'clock. Mira was waiting up for him, hoping he would come—though it meant riding one hundred and seventy-five miles since shortly before midnight; and she could have no idea how long he would be in town. She did know, however, of the relays, and of his tirelessness.

He wondered if Whitey had returned. But, of course, there was little doubt of that, unless something had happened. The riderless horse would disturb Mira little, for the reins must have been wound about the horn, and that meant the horse had been turned loose deliberately.

In a spot where he could look through the uncurtained windows Blue Pete lay in the grass to watch. Presently Mira came into view. She moved across the room, opened a drawer, and took from it something that she bore to the window. Climbing on a chair, she held a width of brightly coloured cloth against the glass, and the light of the room shone dimly through the vivid pattern.

Mira was putting up new curtains! And he, her husband, had never known she so much as thought of making them!

Suddenly she paused, standing perfectly still, and he could see her face come around the curtain and press against the glass. He dropped flat, though there was no possibility that she could see him. After a few moments she got down and came to the door. Standing framed against the light, she peered frowningly about through the darkness.

"Pete!" she called softly. "Pete!"

An odd feeling of inertia was all that held him from leaping up and rushing to her. A strange ecstasy made his muscles limp, though he willed himself to rise. With a sheepish laugh Mira turned and went inside, closing the door behind her.

Blue Pete wiped his forehead with his hand and groaned. Mira continued her work. The curtains were fixed with tacks, the tapping carrying sharply to the unhappy man outside. The light that had been so bright was dull now and broken with coloured pattern. The lamp moved. It passed through to the bedroom, where it was hidden by thick blinds. Then the whole house lay in darkness.

Blue Pete rose and crept to the door. Beneath it he shoved the piece of paper on which he had so laboriously scrawled. Then he moved away to the stable.

The bunk-house had been dark from the first. The cowboys who were in would retire with the daylight.



But they slept lightly, and he must be careful. Cautiously opening the stable door, he hissed into the darkness. From her box-stall Whiskers snorted softly. He picked his way back to her, put on saddle and bridle and, finding a blanket, cut it into four pieces and tied a piece over each hoof.

Almost without a sound they passed outdoors.

But as they came into the open, a broncho from one of the corrals whinnied loudly. Blue Pete's heart rose in his throat. He might have leaped into the saddle and escaped, but that would rouse them all, including Mira; and it might have told a disturbing story. He could not leave that way—fleeing, running from something. The bunk-house door opened and a dark figure loomed against the sky.

It was a tense moment. But pinto and half-breed were equal to it. Before the pinto's light-coloured spots Blue Pete spread himself, and Whiskers stood stockstill. The cowboy yawned and returned indoors.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A PLOT OVERHEARD

MIRA rose early next morning. She had slept badly, vaguely worried about her husband. Straight from the bedroom she hurried to the door and opened it. There in the hollow it was still chill with the night air, though the sun was up two hours ago. A heavy dew sparkled on the grass, and here and there lingered a touch of hoar-frost.

She saw the patch of white at her feet and, with beating heart, snatched it up.

"Don't ast no queshuns," it read.

With a wan smile and a sigh she stepped out on the damp grass and looked about. Unerringly she made straight to where Blue Pete had lain and watched her working at the curtains. She had felt he was there, laughing at herself weakly at the time when he did not answer from the darkness. The flattened grass betrayed what she sought—all except the reason for his secretiveness.

At the stable she saw that Whiskers was gone.

She was not exactly alarmed, but the worry of the night became more definite. He must have a reason, of course, for creeping about that way, but she was not so confident that the reason was a good one. All she understood from the note was he did not wish her to be frightened when he did not return.

But always there lingered in her mind the disquieting fact that, love as they did, she was still white and he a half-breed; one raised on the ranch, the

other stumbling through a life of danger and lawlessness to another existence for which he was not as yet prepared.

In so many things they did not see alike. She understood him better than anyone else in the world, but in the workings of his mind she could not always follow him. Inspector Barker had sent for him, and about his work with the Mounted Police, even with her, Blue Pete threw a veil of secrecy, jealously guarding official secrets. Whitey's return had not upset her, for she had read the coiled reins aright. For some reason, she concluded, Blue Pete had sent the broncho back.

But why was his work for the Mounties so mysterious this time that he dare not even say good-bye?

With a troubled spirit she went about her work, scarcely acknowledging the presence of the clumsy German "hired girl," trying to convince herself that there was nothing more to it than the usual gravity with which Blue Pete always went about the tasks Inspector Barker assigned him.

In the meantime the subject of her anxiety was far away. He had led Whiskers to the spot where he had left the hobbled Mounted Police horse, and had mounted the latter. Whiskers had protested at that by nibbling at his chaps as she ran alongside. Finally she had taken a real nip at the other horse. Blue Pete chuckled.

"Hol' yer hosses, ole gal. Yuh'll git yer fill 'fore we're through, I'm thinkin'."

It was midnight when, after a hard ride, he came abreast of the Inverted T. From far ahead came the sound of galloping horses and the creak of a buckboard. Turning across the prairie, he made straight for the ranch. Above the bottom he dismounted, hobbled the police horse—the hanging reins were

enough to keep Whiskers where she was—and ran down the slope, crawling under the wire fence and, avoiding the corrals, came at last to the ranch-house.

He had scarcely taken his stand behind the trunk of a cottonwood tree when the buckboard came rumbling down the slope. It stopped while the gate was opened and closed, and then rolled on to the ranch-house door. Don Farren leaped out, throwing the reins to one of the boys.

"Gypsy!" he called. "Hello, Gypsy!"

There was a joyous, affectionate ring to his voice that made the half-breed frown. He had never before seen Farren with his daughter, and the exuberant way of the whites—except Mira—often puzzled him and made him vaguely envious. Yet in a way there was something indecently naked in the frankness of their emotions. Mira and he—he would have given worlds to have been able to show her how much he loved her, but all his nature rose against it, tightening his throat and stiffening his muscles.

The girl's slippered feet padded across the floor, and a light came on. Then the door opened, and she was caught up in her father's arms.

"Hello, little girl."

Gypsy placed a hand across his lips. "Sh-sh! You'll waken the natives."

The last word must have struck an image across the rancher's mind—of a grinning half-breed in a seedy hotel dining-room.

"The only native in these parts, thank God, is that da-arned 'breed. Spud tells me he was here last night."

"Yes, he came to tell us of some strays back of the Muddy."

"Huh? He did like the dev—the deuce. Why the—the dickens didn't he tell us wherr he passed us on the trail?"

"He probably didn't think of it Or," she laughed,

"he knew how delighted you'd be to be under obligation to him, dad. Spud sent Bill and Dusty off to look for them."

"Well, they didn't find them. And then that—'breed jumped Dusty's horse and got away with it."

"Oh, that was Blue Pete, was it? Are you sure?"

They went inside, closing the door. The buckboard had gone on to the stable. Blue Pete would have given worlds to have been able to hear what was said inside the house, but the boys would be back from the stable soon, and he must wait for that to get near enough to hear. Presently they came yawning through the darkness and passed indoors. Then he crept close to one of the windows and listened.

He could hear much of what was said now. The two boys seated themselves at the table and commenced to eat. It was a cold meal, and they were more tired than hungry, so that they did not join in the conversation that continued between father and daughter.

"Just nosing about, that's what he was doing," Don Farren was saying. "Feeling his way to more of his rustling. I tell you, Gypsy, I don't want you to have anything to do with him. We don't want him around. All the strays he'll find for us you can put in your eye. It stands to reason. Strays are just so many to the good for a rustler."

"I don't believe he's rustling," Gypsy defended sturdily.

"Then why all this sneaking around the ranges? Look at this: We met him coming out from town yesterday afternoon, and here this morning he was there again. Rode in on Socks, though we couldn't find the broncho in town. Probably stole another mount somewhere."

"Where's Socks now?"

The rancher chewed for several moments at a

mouthful of bread. "Ask your 'breed. Socks was right in his line."

There were several questions Gypsy would have liked to ask, but her father did not seem to know of the shot she herself had fired after that fleeing figure the night before; the cowboys had probably thought the half-breed fired it. After the shot she had started away for the bunk-house to seek an explanation, but the source of that triumphant "yip-ee" came to her, and she knew the story she would get from Spud would be too highly coloured to be credible.

"You say Spud told you he stole Socks? Where did you see Spud?"

"He and Bill and Dusty followed right into the Hat."

"Oh!"

The conversation lapsed as the boys rose and disappeared to their room upstairs. Gypsy had thrown a brilliant satin dressing-gown over her nightdress. Blue Pete could not take his eyes from it.

"Gor-swizzle!" he muttered to himself. "Mira'd shure like suthin' like thet. Wonder whar she got it?"

The sound of approaching horses reached him, and he slunk back against the tree. The door opened and Farren came out. Three riders came trotting down the trail.

"That you, Spud?"

"Yep."

The crude responses of his cowboys never failed to shock Farren's English upbringing, but he knew there was nothing to do about it. He came out into the night and stood close to Spud's broncho.

"You're sure it was the 'breed got away on Socks?"

"'Course I am."

"But you couldn't have seen him."

Spud snorted. "Think I don't know that yell o' his?"

Farren came nearer, and for a few seconds they conversed in tones so low that Blue Pete heard only a word here and there. But he did make out that Farren was first surprised and slightly shocked; but Spud talked rapidly, and presently the rancher appeared to be satisfied. But as he turned back to the house, he threw at Spud, in a worried tone:

"Don't tell me a thing more about it, Spud. I don't care a damn how you get the proof against him. We want him out of the way—and if we can fix this on him, he'll have to skip or be put away for a couple of years. That'll end him in these parts. But, remember, no rough stuff, no shooting. Between you and me I don't care if we lose a dozen horses, provided it means getting rid of him. Just forget you told me anything about this."

He walked away to the house and the door closed. The cowboys rode on to the stables, Spud cursing with satisfaction.

"That's all I need—the boss behind me," he exulted to his companions.

Blue Pete stood for a long time beneath the tree, staring off at a brilliant star close above the ridge that surrounded the hollow where the ranch buildings lay. He sighed.

"Gor-swizzle! Don' seem no other way. . . . Mebbe git muh intuh trouble, but I ain' no hoss-thief. Wonder wot th' Inspector'll think?" he added, with a heavier sigh, as he tramped back to where he had left the horses.

## CHAPTER XV

### SPUD TAYLOR COMPLAINS

IT had been a difficult, an upsetting, almost a tragic day for Spud Taylor. Infuriated and disgraced by his encounter with Blue Pete, early in the afternoon he stormed across the railway to the Mounted Police barracks. Inspector Barker had gone home to lunch, and Spud was forced to sit kicking his heels in the hall for an hour.

In a way he was glad. It gave him time to prepare his story, and to efface more effectively the marks of his rough treatment at the hands of the half-breed. He never felt comfortable with the Mounted Police. They were hard to deceive, and they were so disturbingly curious when they got a chance to ask questions. He was aware that a story of the night's events might well give itself away, but before the Inspector returned he had viewed from every angle what he was going to say and was satisfied.

Inspector Barker's quick eye discerned the marks of Spud's downfall, but he made no comment. His greeting was quiet. The fact was that Spud assumed no more importance at the moment than an irritating bluebottle. It was Blue Pete of whom the official was thinking—of the half-breed's strange manner in his office that morning, of his reluctance to take on the sort of task that had always before filled his eyes with an eager light. Had he noticed the disappearance of the silver spurs he would have acted instantly, but he had forgotten all about them. They were to appear later to convict him.



"Want to see me, Spud? All right, come inside."

He chuckled as they passed through to the office. "Looks like a bank holiday for the Inverted T to-day. Don paid me a visit last night, and I saw him and Andy on the street just before—early this morning." He did not wish anyone to know he had been in the office at such an early hour.

"Yes," said Spud, "Mr. Farren and the boys are in town. But we—that's Dusty an' Bill an' me—we didn't come with them. We just come in—not long ago. Been ridin' since midnight."

"Anything serious? Skipping away from someone, Spud?"

"Not by a damn' sight we ain't," growled Spud. "We're skippin' *after* someone. It's that damned 'breed."

Inspector Barker's ears pricked up. To conceal his interest he picked up his pipe and commenced to fill it, gathering together some of the tobacco always scattered on the blotter.

"Blue Pete, you mean? I think I saw him on the street this morning, didn't I?"

"Yu shore did." Spud gulped back the inclination to unburden himself of some of the ache of a losing fight. "He was over at the Royal—just a while ago."

The Inspector nodded gloomily. "Yes, I've noticed him hanging about there quite a lot lately. I hope they're not loading him with booze. I suppose the police should see about that, but, since he isn't quite an Indian, I doubt if we can do much about it."

Spud did not know what to reply. Anything he might say about that would involve the half-breed so little that he was not prepared to face the hostility such a charge would justify from the Royal Hotel and its patrons.

"I dunno about that. But," he snarled, "I do know he's a damned nuisance wherever he is. . . . And," he added slyly, "maybe he's more'n that."

The Inspector shifted the position of a pen on the desk. "What do you think he is?"

Spud leered cunningly. "I ain't makin' no charges, because he's too cute to catch at it. But I gotta hunch maybe I won't need to say more than what I know. He's a horse-thief?"

Inspector Barker's heart sank with a sickening thud. "You mean he's—rustling?" It seemed to explain so much.

"Well, I ain't got no proof about rustlin', but he's a horse-thief." (The Inspector knew the difference.) "He stole Dusty's bronc this mornin' from the Inverted T."

The Inspector leaned back in his chair, rocking on the lop-sided springs. Did this explain everything?

"What's the story, Spud? Give me the whole thing."

Spud drew a long breath and commenced. Carefully as he had prepared the story, running it over and over in his mind as he waited, he was not certain of himself now. But he managed to adhere pretty closely to the details he had planned, and to keep them so near the truth that he felt he must be safe.

Bill and Dusty had been riding late in search of strays that Blue Pete had, oddly enough, informed them about. He himself had had his doubts from the first of the half-breed's story, and his suspicions were borne out by the fact that the two riders had failed to find the strays. He had waited up at the bunk-house for their return. It was while they were discussing the search that Blue Pete had come up through the darkness and jumped Dusty's horse. Spud elaborated on the murderous shots the half-breed had fired at them, and of the positive identification possible from those triumphant "yip-ee's" he had hurled back at them.

"Why didn't you get after him right away?" queried the Inspector.

" 'Cause there was only Bill's bronc saddled, an' Socks is the fastest mount we have. Besides, in the dark it wasn't safe to risk that 'breed and his gun."

Inspector Barker sat drumming nervously on the blotter with the end of the pen. The story was too circumstantial to be unfounded, and Spud would never dare make the charge without being able to prove it. It threw, too, a revealing light on Blue Pete's uneasy manner during their interview. But equally certainly Spud had not told the whole story. Even had he not been able to read the foreman's manner and face, he was certain to give everything he said a bias against the half-breed.

There was, however, nothing to do but to accept the story and take steps to examine the charge and bring Blue Pete to account. With this assurance Spud had to be satisfied, and with a satisfied leer he swaggered back to the Royal for a round of drinks—and to live down—or try to—his inglorious exit through the bar-room window.

Even before he was gone from the barracks the Inspector had a plan in his mind. He hurried to the telephone exchange and got in touch with Constable Simmons at Turner's Crossing once more. And the conversation that ensued added several degrees to his worry. Indeed, it threw him into something of a panic. Blue Pete had arrived in the dark of the previous morning on foot—he had been told that in the call they had right after the half-breed had returned through the Crossing, but the Inspector had had other things in his mind about the man, and he had failed to grasp its significance. Now it meant so much, for it seemed to prove that the half-breed knew he had got himself in for more trouble.

Thereupon the Inspector set about following Blue Pete's movements while in town. He satisfied himself quickly enough that he had ridden straight away from the Royal and out towards home, for a merchant

living near the top of Toronto Street had seen him pass.

Sergeant Mahon, reached at Eagle Butte, knew nothing. He was directed, therefore, to proceed to the 3-Bar-Y in the morning and make enquiries. If that failed to get them in touch with Blue Pete, he was to continue his enquiries at other ranches, as well as among the cowhands he came in contact with on the prairie. But the search as yet was to be conducted quietly, without arousing a suspicion that the half-breed had run into trouble with the Mounted Police. Of course, Spud was bound to talk, but there was to be no hue-and-cry business.

The Inspector went home to a sleepless night. As things were, so far as he knew, of course, he had no real cause for alarm, for he did not wish to believe all Spud had told him. And always he tried to keep his mind clear until a final proof. A man was always innocent until he was proven guilty; and it would take more than Spud Taylor's unsupported charges to convict anyone. But the effort to attain such a calm attitude towards events was, he quickly recognized, only a dangerous struggle to delude himself. Everything pointed to another of the justified worries Blue Pete was continually bringing down on the Mounted Police.

For some time the Inspector had had a feeling that Blue Pete was spoiling for something to happen, for action, and he knew him too well to have any delusions concerning any fastidiousness about the opportunity for that action.

It was still dark the next morning when his house telephone rang. Constable Simmons was at the other end.

"The horse is back, Inspector."

"That's good. You're holding him there?"

"I never even saw him."

The Inspector dare not ask for details; already

they had said more than he cared for Central to know. "I'll call you up from Central at seven o'clock. Stick about."

It was not yet seven when he appeared at the telephone exchange and took the customary precautions against being overheard.

"You say the horse is back? How in the world was it you didn't see him? You knew I wanted him."

"He gave me no chance. I found the horse tied to the rail just before I called you up. I was only half asleep at the time, and I jumped up when I heard a noise; but whoever left the horse was gone by the time I reached the door. It was too dark to see who it was."

The Inspector considered. At least it was some relief to know that the Mounted Police horse was back at Turner's Crossing. If the half-breed was rustling, his operations did not extend to an official animal.

"All right. Scout around and see if you can find the tracks of another horse—the pinto, for instance. She's unshod, you know."

"Am I to arrest him if I come on him?"

"M-m—I want him here, understand? I want him if you have to hog-tie him."

## CHAPTER XVI

### SERGEANT MAHON ON THE TRAIL

THE events of the night, so far as Blue Pete was concerned, were direct and well considered. Straight from the Inverted T he rode to Turner's Crossing, still mounted on the police horse, despite Whiskers's protests. Finally the pinto's peevishness got on his nerves, and he flicked her lightly with his quirt.

"Dang' fule!" he reproved. "Jealous—like you women allus are. Wal, I promised yuh'd git yer fill. Now come 'long—like a lady."

He reached over and patted the place where his quirt had struck.

"Tha're layin' fer us, ole gal. You 'n' me's gotta travel mighty spry an' cunnin'. I'm goin' tuh need yuh 'fore we're through—an' all yuh got mebbe. . . . Thet thar I heerd at th' Inverted T didn' sound so good. Wan' muh out th' way, do they? Goin' tuh git rid o' muh. An' th' wust of it is I ken' talk it over 'th th' Inspector. Wudn't wonder ef th' Inspector's hankerin' tuh talk things over 'th muh right now. . . . You 'n' me's got tuh ride it out alone, ole gal, look's ef."

It was dark still, with the first glint of coming day peeping over the north-eastern prairie when, leaving Whiskers behind, he rode forward a few paces and dismounted. He had brought with him the pieces of blanket he had torn in his own stable, and these he tied over his mount's hoofs.

Leading the horse, he crept along to the police hut, avoiding the trail. The soft grass gave back nothing more than a rustle as they moved along. There was a tie-rail before the hut, and to this he fastened the horse and removed the mufflers from its legs.

Thus far everything had gone smoothly. But he had just released the last hoof when a horse whinnied from the stable, and before he could choke off a reply his own horse had whinnied in reply.

On the instant Constable Simmons came pounding across the floor and threw the door open.

"Pete! Pete! Is that you?"

Blue Pete had glided away, but he dare not go far, for the constable was listening now. The half-breed did not know that Inspector Barker had given orders to bring him in, but it was all the same to him—at all cost he must keep out of the way of the Mounties. There he lay, his heart in his mouth.

Fortunately it was too dark even for Constable Simmons to see the horse tied to the rail; but, not satisfied, he turned back to the room, and the half-breed heard him putting on his slippers. In a moment he was out in the open, standing without a sound, listening.

The horse at the rail moved. The constable heard it and uttered an exclamation of surprise and annoyance.

Only a few yards away Blue Pete lay flattened against the ground, holding his breath, his hands spread, prepared to flee. But the constable, after further listening, went to the horse, untied it, and led it away to the stable.

And as Blue Pete crept away through the darkness he heard his name called again and again.

Summoned to a conference in the Inspector's office, Sergeant Mahon bore the brunt of his superior's worry.

"He's gone off on another of those damned tangents of his, and it's sure to land us in hot water again. I can't understand why he avoided Simmons as he did. If he's rustling, why the devil did he take such pains to return the horse? On the market it's worth half a dozen of these bronses. Of course, he didn't wish to be questioned. Simmons's curiosity on his previous visits upset him. Why? Because he daren't tell about that broncho Spud spoke about. It bears out that story—at least in part. Damn it, can you think of any reason for all this sneaking about except that he's off the track again?"

The questions, bitter, peevish, disappointed, were directed to Blue Pete's special friend among the Mounted Police, the one who had known him longest—even longer than Mira. The one who, next to Mira, liked him best. As a special friend of the half-breed's he offered an outlet for the Inspector's pent-up irritation.

And Mahon, as disturbed as his superior, and less free to express himself, kept silent. The Inspector continued:

"What else is there to think but that Spud Taylor—and a damned crooked specimen he is, I think—but that he told the truth? Mahon, Blue Pete has gone back to his rustling! More and more I'm coming to think once a rustler, always a rustler. Oh, Lord!" He threw up his hands and ploughed about the office. "He's going to have me in the asylum before we're through with him. Why the devil have we got to have him always hanging over us?"

Sergeant Mahon smiled wanly. "I suppose, sir, because we find him so useful."

"Useful? Sure he can be useful—if he'd only give himself a chance. The trouble is we've got to keep him busy or he's bound to bust out. He can't stand the idle life. But if we've always got to pray for trouble, just to keep Blue Pete busy—Lord, he only adds to it.



There never was any trouble greater than what he starts."

"We might take steps to deport him, sir," suggested the Sergeant slyly.

The Inspector whirled on him. "Why don't *you* make yourself useful?" he snarled. Then he sighed. "That's the devil of it, Mahon. You like him; I like him. And you're right—he's got us out of many a hole . . . and got us into a few."

"I'm quite certain, sir," the Sergeant defended sturdily, "he's not gone back to rustling."

"Well, if you can think of any other devilment he's up to, let's have it. I'll say this for him—it's only rustling he knows. We've got to face facts, Mahon: Blue Pete has run out on us. I knew by the way he acted he didn't wish to take on the job of running those rustlers down——"

"Perhaps that's why he disappeared, sir."

"But why should he?" The Inspector came and stood with feet wide before his subordinate. "Is it because he's the rustler himself?"

"Even if that were so, sir, it's decent of him to disappear rather than to delude us into thinking he was going to help us."

The Inspector threw out his hands impatiently. "You never could see anything bad in him. But how do you explain all this wandering of his? Why, one's apt to pop on him anywhere—that is, if he's willing to be popped on. To-day he's here, to-morrow he's prowling about the hills—apparently with nothing to do but scurry over the country on that ugly little pinto of his. He swaggers around the town, hanging about the Royal, more than likely."

"He says, sir, he likes the Royal, because he learns much there that he can't pick up elsewhere."

"Of course. That's how he explained it to me. Well, he seems to have picked up Spud Taylor over there yesterday morning. I saw the marks of it on

Spud when he came to tell about the theft. I've heard a story of a new window that had to be put in the bar-room."

"Pretty hard, sir, isn't it, to believe a man like Spud when he's sore."

"You mark my words, Mahon,"—the Inspector punctuated his words with a pointed finger—"Spud's story was true enough in essentials."

They discussed for a time the details of the foreman's charge, puzzled that Blue Pete should have been at the ranch, and unmounted, and that he should have walked to the police hut later at Turner's Crossing. And after that he had dared to ride into town on a police horse.

"What did you find at the Three-Bar-Y?" asked the Inspector.

"Nothing material. The pinto was gone, no one knew where or how. Chick said he heard a broncho whinny that night, and he went outside, but he could see nothing. He says there's a blanket missing, and I found a few shreds in the stable that makes me think Blue Pete cut it up and used it to muffle the pinto's hoofs."

"And Mira?"

"She knows nothing—or she says so. Said she hadn't seen him since a few minutes after I took your message to come to town. . . . Something that puzzles me: I got in touch with the night-herders of the Three-Bar-Y. They tell me someone roped a calf early that night and killed it and carried it off. They caught a glimpse of the fellow in the gathering darkness, but they dare not follow, because the cattle threatened to stampede. Odd thing to do."

Inspector Barker paced about the room, shaking his head. "What the devil is getting into the prairie these days?" He sighed. "Give me the good old days when crime was straightforward and simple, with something for the Mounted Police to bite on. A calf, you say, a single calf?"

"It might be one of the town butchers," suggested Mahon.

The Inspector pooh-poohed it. "No chance. No butcher would go that far for a single calf. Besides, we check up on the brands of every carcass. They could never get away with it. No, Mahon, there's only one way out of this muddle: we must get Blue Pete. That's your job, and the rest can go to hell. Get after him."

But as Mahon rose to leave, he added:

"Of course, if it means following him into the Hills—well, if he's using the Hills for rustling, he won't let anyone break into the game, and that's something. Better leave the Hills out for a while till we see what happens."

Sergeant Mahon got after Blue Pete. He returned straightway to the 3-Bar-Y and came away as empty-handed as before. Blue Pete had certainly not been seen there.

He rode across the country to the farm Lee Cutten was struggling to carve from the heart of a cow country. The Cuttens would talk. Lee Cutten and his sister Phœbe were always glad to see the Mounted Police, their only friends in the whole district and their protection from the ire of the ranchers whose reign they challenged. Then, too, the farmer had no reason for reticence in the presence of the Mounted Police; there was nothing he could do to break the laws. Or so the Cuttens thought. They were to be disillusioned about that very quickly.

As he neared the farm-house Sergeant Mahon observed in the distance, far away at the most distant corner of the section, half of which he was homesteading, the other half purchased from the Government for a pittance, Lee and his hired man working at the fence Lee planned for the entire section. The house was built in a sheltered valley well to one corner.

The Sergeant rode slowly down the slope towards the house. As he did so, the strains of a guitar floated up to him, and he smiled and shook his head.

The structure before him was part of the offence of which Lee Cutten's neighbours were so conscious. It was built of logs, but plastered so thickly with mud from the small stream that flowed through the valley that it looked like one of the turf makeshifts that had not been seen in the district for many years. Indeed, the ridge, which had evidently not proven storm-tight, was covered with a layer of turf to shed the rain. From this rough mass protruded at the corners of the building the ends of the logs, showing their crude treatment, shaped by an amateur axe.

Yet about the house was a sense of cosy comfort difficult to analyse. It was small, and it had a pleasing aspect of solidity and permanence, in spite of the rough surface of dried mud. And over it all was a coating of fresh whitewash, dazzlingly white and fresh. The windows were gaily curtained, and the door was painted a vivid green. A few oddly shaped flower-beds bloomed luxuriantly before the door, extending even far towards the other buildings, which consisted of a good-sized barn and stable combined, and two corrals. Beside the stable was a shed in which was visible certain astonishing farm machinery that, more than anything else, convinced—and therefore angered—the ranchers of the permanence of Cutten's plans. Every stick about the place was whitewashed, a touch of blue being added to deaden the dazzle in the everlasting sun of the prairie.

No one appeared to be aware of his approach, and the Sergeant, picking up the tune that reached him through the open door, commenced to whistle.

A woman came hastily into the doorway, shading her eyes with her hand, vanished without a sign of recognition, and reappeared as the Sergeant brought his mount to a halt. He touched his hat.

"Good morning, Miss Cutten."

"Good morning, Sergeant."

Accustomed to being received figuratively with open arms, the Sergeant was not surprised at the slight coolness of the greeting. He smiled.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he said.

A slight flush rose to her cheeks. "Not at all."

He let his eyes focus admiringly on the girl before him. Phoebe Cutten was short and plump, with a skin that, despite the drying, burning touch of the prairie sun, looked almost as the day she came to the country. Her black hair was caught into a long bob behind her neck, the ends curling rebelliously away, as if striving to cover her beautiful shoulders. For she wore a sleeveless house dress, with little more than straps over the shoulders, the neck cut well out before and behind. In the smooth, white skin of her face black eyebrows and black eyes, and deep red lips, made pleasing, if striking, contrast.

The guitar had ceased at the first sound of whistling.

"Is your brother about?" enquired the Sergeant.

Something beyond the innocent words must have been conveyed by the question, for the red in the girl's cheeks deepened. A smile twitched at the corners of the Sergeant's lips.

"He's out back working at the fence. Did you wish to speak to him? I can"—she paused and half turned to the room behind her, then hurried on—"I can call him with the horn."

The Sergeant leaned indifferently forward to pat the neck of Jupiter, his mount.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't do that. I don't suppose he can tell me more than you can. I was just riding about—on my rounds. Anything happened lately—any visitors about?"

The girl stiffened. The Sergeant laughed lazily.

"Oh, I don't mean Andy. I heard the guitar."

Phoebe flushed again.

"Come on out, Andy," she called back into the room. "It's all up. The Mounties have run you down."

Andy Farren's face showed behind her shoulder. It was a trifle wide-eyed and pale. But the Sergeant was laughing, and Andy grinned sheepishly and came outside, the guitar slung over his shoulder.

"What's on your mind, Sergeant?" he asked. "What sort of visitors are you looking for?"

The Sergeant shrugged. "Just checking up—poking about."

"Is it the rustlers?" Phœbe enquired. "I can't imagine anyone else—except Andy—ever coming around here. We haven't a calling-day yet among the ranchers, you know, Sergeant," she added, with a wry twist of her pretty face. "And there isn't anything here worth a rustler's attentions."

"Perhaps it's another scheme of the ranchers to frighten the poor farmer away," suggested Andy. "Anything they can wheedle the Mounted Police into doing is within the law."

"Your father would like to hear you say that," said the Sergeant.

"He'd like it better than I'd like him to hear it," said Andy. "Just the same, rancher's son as I am, I've my opinion about the way they treat Phœbe and her brother."

"The ranchers have had this country so long to themselves," said the Sergeant. "It's not unnatural for them to feel a little sore when they see the range broken into. There's nothing anyone can do about it, I suppose. There's really nothing they can do to you, Miss Cutten, more than they do now. You've a right to be here. The law says so, and that's where we come into the picture."

Andy stood looking him over, head tilted, his eyes half closed.

"If I see Blue Pete, I'll let you know," he laughed.

The Sergeant's laugh was somewhat tardy, but he

knew the whole district must be talking about the stolen horse by now. Still, he was not going to lend himself to the idea that the Mounted Police were out to arrest the half-breed.

"I've heard something about a lost horse," he said.

"Spud has another word for it," said Andy. "Only if I were stealing a horse I'd do it wholesale. And I wouldn't select a bronc with four white stockings you can see a couple of miles away. I give the half-breed more credit than to think he'd do a fool thing like that. Besides, he didn't skip out; he was in the Hat next day. Where was Socks, white socks and all, when he was in town?"

Lee Cutten rode around the corner of the stable and joined the group. At sight of Andy he frowned, and the young man stepped back, glowering a little.

"Good day, Sergeant."

"Good day, Cutten."

Lee Cutten was a tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered young man, with a face that appeared to have settled permanently into grim, melancholy lines. He was hatless, and his long fair hair grew bushily over his head. His lips were not so much thin as held thinly together, as if perpetually making a stand against something equally resistant.

After the first swift angry glance at Andy, and another of reproving surprise at his sister, he ignored them.

"Is the army coming to our protection, Sergeant?" he enquired bitterly.

"I don't understand."

"If you'd been out with me this morning you would. They cut another strand of my wire fence last night."

"Ah!" The Sergeant sobered. "That's something for us—even if we have to bring an army. You have a right to protection."

"Protection?" Cutten's voice was harsh with indignation. "Why should we need protection?"

This is my land—mine. No rancher ever owned a foot of it. They own mighty few feet anywhere, as a matter of fact. Yet they think I have no right to fence what is legally mine. Well, I propose to fence it; I don't propose to let anyone wander over it as if it was open range."

He fixed his gaze on Andy. The young man tried to laugh.

"If you think I cut your wire fence, you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Do you know who did cut it?" asked the Sergeant sharply.

Andy shook his head. "It's no use asking me that. If I did know I wouldn't blab." His tone had taken on a shadow of defiance.

"You have an alibi for yourself?"

"Why should I have? Do you plan to make every rancher within a hundred miles furnish an alibi for last night? I tell you I wasn't within miles of his damned fence."

"Andy!" Phœbe's cry cut sharply through his anger.

"Well, I wasn't, Phœbe, and you know I wouldn't do it, anyway."

"I don't believe you did," she replied.

"Where were you last night, then?" asked the Sergeant. He had put the question originally with nothing more than a thought of soothing the anger bubbling within Cutten's cold exterior; but something in Andy's manner puzzled him.

"None of your damned business," shouted Andy, and stalked to the side of the house where his broncho was tied to a ring in the wall. Mounting, he started away.

"Andy Farren!"

At the sound of Phœbe's challenging cry he turned back.

"All right," he said sheepishly. "That was



foolish. I've nothing to run from. Now what about it, Sergeant?"

"Nothing, nothing at all—except that I don't know anyone who can make a bigger fool of himself." He turned towards Cutten. "The Inspector tells me you're using barbed wire for the top strand of your fence."

"That's so. It'll stop any blundering wandering of the cattle. I'm not going to have them bulling their way into my crops."

The Sergeant heard him through with an expressionless face. "But barbed wire is against the law in a range country, Cutten—at least, it is out here."

Cutten's lips parted, and his eyes flashed angrily. "Against the law! Good Lord, do the ranchers make the whole damned laws of the country, too?"

"It's a reasonable law. Outside your fence the cattle have a right to roam unimpeded on range land."

"And I'm not preventing them. But they won't roam over——"

"Unfortunately their roaming cannot be entirely controlled, even by the best of cowboys. In a winter storm, for instance, they drift before the wind—or in a stampede. They'd drift up against that barbed wire and be cut to pieces. That's the argument—and a good one. It justifies the law—though it's not our business to justify it, but to enforce it. Barbed wire will do more than keep cattle off your property: it will tear them to pieces. Your barbed wire must come down, Cutten."

Cutten lifted his shoulders, and his fists clenched. "The whole country is run for ranchers who make their fortunes from public lands, and when anyone buys it—as *they* should have done—they take it as a crime, as a personal affront. They're dead set against progress—and so are the laws. I should have known it," he burst out impetuously. "The ranchers hate

me because I want my own land and not a foot more. It troubles their thieving consciences. Now—I've far more reason to hate them. I've got that barbed wire on hand, and paid for. It's——"

"I've no doubt the supply house will take it back and exchange it. Plain wire is cheaper, too."

"Cheaper?" Cutten flung back his head with a sneer. "Cheaper, when two strands would have served my purpose. Now I must have three, perhaps four, and the posts will have to be twice as thick and strong. The trouble with you Mounties"—he shook his fist towards the Sergeant—"is that you've lived and worked so long with these ranchers that you can't see anyone else's side. Some day this land will be farmed; and all these cattle will be gone—or fenced in, where they should be. And not all the Mounties in heaven or hell will prevent it."

"It's only the Mounties in the Medicine Hat district that are concerned with this," said the Sergeant dryly.

"Why don't you enforce the law against the ranchers," demanded Cutten.

"Don't we?"

"No, you don't." He pointed at Andy. "I've ordered him never to come around here again, yet he keeps coming. Yet if I kicked him off I'd be jailed for assault and battery or something. As soon as my back is turned he comes around."

Phœbe walked straight up to him, her shoulders back, and touched him on the arm.

"Because I permit it, Lee," she said. "Isn't it better for him to come when you're not here, seeing how you hate him—hate everyone?"

"I tell you——" her brother began furiously, drawing away his arm.

The Sergeant's upraised hand stopped him. He turned to Andy.

"Is that true—that he's forbidden you to come?"

It was Phœbe who replied. "It makes no difference, Sergeant. This farm is as much mine as Lee's. My money went into everything about it." She turned to her brother, tears in her eyes. "Lee, Lee, I didn't think we'd ever quarrel like this. Andy is hurting no one."

The anger died from Lee's face, and he bit his lips.

"He's made us quarrel, Phœbe; he's brought hell about the place."

He whirled on his heels and, mounting his horse, galloped away.

Phœbe wiped her eyes and sighed. "Sometimes I don't understand Lee," she moaned. "He's learned to hate so hard. . . . Besides, I don't say anything when Gypsy comes. I'm only too glad to have her, anyway."

Andy spurred up to her, his lips pursed, his eyes staring.

"Does—does Gypsy—come here—to this place?"

Phœbe shook her head sadly. "I shouldn't have told, Andy—I shouldn't have said anything about that. I don't know what I'm saying. Please, Andy, please forget it."

Andy whistled a rising and falling note. "Well, I'll be doggoned! Gypsy! So that's where the little vixen gets away to by herself!" He whistled again. "Say, won't dad's digestion be ruined some day?"

The Sergeant was almost equally surprised. The stirring of Jupiter reminded him that he had work to do.

"Come along, Andy; we'll go."

Unconsciously his tone had a note of command. Andy bristled.

"I'll go when I please." Then he saw the tears come flooding once more to Phœbe's eyes, and he wheeled his horse about and galloped away.

Sergeant Mahon watched him go with shaking head.

"I seem to have aroused a storm of unfortunate emotions here, Miss Cutten. I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry about that fence, too. But I'm sorrier about the way your brother took it—and I'm disturbed. I wish you'd keep an eye on him. I don't want to. I'm afraid he's in no mood to take it lying down."

## CHAPTER XVII

### INCLUDING THE INDIANS

**A**T the Inverted T the Sergeant had no better luck. At that ranch so intimately connected with Blue Pete's disappearance there was no necessity for an oblique approach; and Spud was not only ready but eager to talk. In fact, he was garrulous concerning the half-breed.

Don Farren was less communicative, referring the Sergeant to Spud and Dusty and revealing a decided disinclination to discuss the subject. But concerning the general rustling he was luridly loquacious, the inference being that the mention of Blue Pete's name had rightly introduced the matter. But in the end he swung it away to Lee Cutten. There was about it a suggestion that the pair might be working together—a clever but not very reasonable idea.

The story of the chase—for it assumed that magnitude in the public mind—spread like wildfire, livened by bits of gossip and surmise. Until Blue Pete became something of a werewolf, a Frankenstein monster, a bogey. Even the raucous wails of the coyotes, so familiar in the district, attained a new mystery and horror.

Inspector Barker would much have preferred to keep their search secret, but to attempt it might well rouse suspicion of indulgence, the last thing he desired. Besides, if Blue Pete had really returned to his rustling, he would have to be treated like any other rustler.

If he was proven innocent, then the resoluteness and zeal of the Mounted Police in running him down would assist in covering their association.

What finally got under Sergeant Mahon's skin during his visit to the Inverted T was the fervour with which Don Farren and Spud laid the blame for everything on the Mounted Police. With Farren his retort was short, but silencing:

"I've often been puzzled by the resentment all you ranchers feel against one who rides about the range without first announcing his itinerary. We might some day find it profitable to look further into that."

Spud he handled more bluntly:

"You may run across him yourself, Spud. Of course, you'll bring him in to us." He smiled as he said it, for everyone knew now of the scene in the bar-room of the Royal Hotel. "When we do find him, the Inspector is going to be interested in the half-breed's side of the story you tell. Because you haven't told it all. You know the Mounted Police play no favourites, and when we have Blue Pete's story to place beside yours we'll know what really did happen—and act accordingly."

Spud sputtered and blustered. "Yu mean I'm lyin'?"

Sergeant Mahon's lip curled. "I'm not a cowboy, Spud. Keep your bluster for those it may work with. You might, for instance, try it once more on Blue Pete. It would probably be the last time. But anything you do or say, let it be to his face. There's going to be no rough stuff about this—unless we do it. We want him, yes, but I don't think you'll help much. Oh, never mind"—impatiently, as Spud, driven to further bluster by a circle of listening cowboys, started to speak. "You've told your story. I don't want to hear any more."

Dusty came to the foreman's rescue: "Perhaps

yu-all'd like us punchers to go out an' round the 'breed up for you."

"Cowpunching would be awfully dull before you got through," laughed the Sergeant. "Rounding up Blue Pete would be one of the Sisyphean tasks. Quite a horde of straight-shooting rustlers have tried it and shied off from trying a second time—if they survived."

"They drove him out of Montana," sneered Spud.

Mahon regarded him contemptuously. "If your story is as crooked as that one, we'd better arrest you right away for making a false charge. If Dutch Henry were alive—and that he isn't you can lay to Blue Pete—he'd advise you lads to lay off on the half-breed if you want whole skins. Dutch Henry would tell you Blue Pete could have picked off that whole gang if he'd cared to. But he isn't a killer—unless he's pushed. In fact, it's too bad he didn't feel pushed that time. No, Dusty, better leave the task to us. The country pays for our funerals. Take my advice: if you happen to catch sight of Blue Pete, make for the nearest Mounted Policeman."

The Sergeant's undisguised contempt rankled with Spud.

"Suppose we got other ideas, Sergeant? I got somethin' myself to say to that 'breed when we meet."

"Then say it by telephone. You never learn, do you, Spud?"

"I never forget a debt," snarled Spud.

"Neither did Dutch Henry—till it was too late."

Night and day Mahon and Constable Simmons rode the prairie, but without so much as catching a glimpse of Blue Pete or his little pinto. Even Inspector Barker, irritable and nervous at the delay, and futilely

hoping that the personal equation might count, took a flyer into the Cypress Hills—where he did not wish his men to go. And promptly he lost himself. With mingled feelings of chagrin, gratitude, and amusement, he found his way out by following a mysterious rifle-shot that kept moving away before him.

The one result of that futile visit to the Hills was that, whereas he had begun to think Blue Pete might have left the country, he knew now that something he had not yet fathomed was moving in the half-breed's mind, something that kept him within the jurisdiction of the Mounted Police.

What that something was became the problem he had to solve, and the day after his return to the barracks he spent in deep thinking.

The outcome was another visit, this time to the Indian encampment on the outskirts of the town. It was pitched amidst the grooves and chasms that slit the cutbank to the east, a circumscribed jumble of fissures and gaps reserved for the Indians, and the railway climbing towards the east from the valley where the town lay.

Half a dozen braves lounged on the hill-side in the sun, overlooking the camp, when the Inspector came on them. Below them, about the tepees, women and children worked or frolicked, all mixed up with a horde of mangy dogs. The Inspector had come on the group from above, having ridden around and climbed to circle the side of the cutbank. He knew these Indians—knew that, warned of his approach, not a brave would have been in sight. There were so many upsetting reasons for an official visit, most of them petty enough and likely to be ignored by the Mounted Police. But to the minds of the red men the laws, multitudinous and unintelligible, were made solely for their discomfiture. They had limited conception of gradations in crime. The



fact was that the Indians about Medicine Hat were for the most part too lazy to commit a major crime unless under great provocation, or unless goaded or bribed by the whites. They were also too frightened of the Mounted Police.

"Good day, boys!"

The Inspector drew up in a level spot near the group, but he did not dismount. They looked up at him, startled, resentful, and guilty. One grunted a greeting.

"Busy these days, boys?"

Their uneasiness increased. They would not look at him.

"Do you want to earn something—on a nice easy job?"

They distrusted the Mounted Police bringing gifts, and still they remained silent. But a shifting of their bodies revealed that they were ready to listen. The Inspector went directly to the point.

"We're trying to find someone."

The one who appeared to be the leader grunted: "Huh! Blue Pete."

Little that happened in the district failed to reach the ears of the Indians. Their eyes flew together now, and a low chorus of grunts expressed some feeling unintelligible to the Inspector.

"Yes," he agreed, "it's Blue Pete. How about helping us—for pay, of course?"

To the Indians Blue Pete was anathema. They hated him even more than did the ranchers. The contempt their grandfathers had felt for the cross-breed had altered in the years that had passed to a hatred born of jealousy, suspicion and resentment. This phase of their feelings towards the half-breed had arisen following the North-West Rebellion. Riel, the half-breed leader of that tragic mistake, educated, yet, in ways he knew how to utilize, more Indian than the Indian, had worked his way with them by

his superior cunning and by exercising the arts he had learned from the whites. And with the repression of the Rebellion, the exposure of Riel's weakness, the contempt of the Indians had turned to hatred.

Against Blue Pete that feeling was accentuated by his unconcealed contempt for their lazy and ineffectual ways, as well as by certain distressing experiences during the time when he worked openly with the Mounted Police.

The leader looked up cunningly into the Inspector's face. "You want Blue Pete. We get him."

Something in the exultant anticipation of the tone warned the Inspector.

"Very well, Grey Coyote. But you get him as I wish you to get him."

"You make us Mounties," said Grey Coyote. "We get him sure."

"Oh, no. I couldn't do that. I——"

"You want him," Grey Coyote insisted. "We bring him in."

"But I don't wish you to bring him in. All I want is to know where he is and what he is doing. I want you to keep track of him and report to me. There'll be a hundred dollars for you if you do that. Of course, if you can induce him to come in to the barracks, all the better. But you mustn't use force; there must be no trouble.

The Indian shrugged. "We chase Blue Pete. We find him. You go look. He not there. Hunnerd dolluh all gone—like that." He snapped his finger.

"If you can tell me where he is hiding and what he is doing, I'll know why he is hiding. I'll know, too, if you tell the truth. Make no mistake about that. You'll have your money if you do what I say and nothing more."

The Indians conferred in low, grunting tones.

The Inspector knew a few words of Blackfeet, but he could not follow them. Grey Coyote looked up.

"You give some dolluh now. We got nothing. We ride maybe for long time."

"No, no money now. I'll see that you get your supplies, however."

Again they gabbled together. Grey Coyote made their decision known.

"We go. We start to-day. You have rifles for us?"

Their persistence in their efforts to involve him more deeply in something the wisdom of which he doubted more and more with every word annoyed him.

"What the hell do you want rifles for? I said there must be no force. You must take no rifles. You won't need them if you do only what I say. If you attempt more, I won't be responsible for what happens. You understand? And I won't pay you a cent if you do more than I say. Now I've told you what I want."

"We go," said Grey Coyote sullenly. "We come right away to police-house."

"You'll do no such thing. Stay here. I'll send the supplies to you." He leaned from his horse and pointed his quirt at the leader. "You'll do as I say or there's nothing for you. Remember that."

He wheeled the horse about and rode away.

It was noon when four lithe, eager Indian braves, with heavy rolls fastened to the cantles of their saddles, rode up the railway grade to Dunmore Junction and swung directly southward. They rode straight-backed, dignified, on horseback no longer the languid, useless human dregs, content to lounge about a camp-fire and watch their squaws make life more comfortable for them.

And strapped tightly against their saddles beneath their legs—not in the saddle-holsters—they all carried rifles. For the Inspector had scarcely left the camp when an Indian, bearing four rifles, disappeared along the railway into the cutbank. A few minutes later he returned empty-handed.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A NARROW ESCAPE

**F**LEEING from Constable Simmons at Turner's Crossing, Blue Pete remained for a long time in the darkness where he had left Whiskers. His brow was furrowed, and now and then irritated ejaculations burst from him. With the coming of daylight he made certain that Whiskers was invisible from the trail, then crept back and commenced to prowl about, bent low over the ground. A flash of excitement showed in his eyes at one point, but in a moment or two it vanished, and with a growl he abandoned the search and returned to the pinto.

A spot of movement on the trail far to the north sent him quickly to cover. In a few minutes several riders passed, cowboys in the earlier stages of recovery from a day in town, singing and joking, playing tricks on one another, heedless, some of the accumulated spirits of weeks of lonesome, dull range-riding already burnt out in their cups. They were the group he had met in the Royal Hotel the morning before, most of them from the Double X. Fitchy alone showed no effects of the day's carousal.

When they were gone, Blue Pete, keeping an eye on the trail in both directions, rode after them to the south.

Arriving at the point where the trail branched off to the Inverted T, he pulled up and sat looking in the direction of the pleasant little valley that was so wrapped up in his plans. Then, with a toss of his hand, he turned Whiskers from the trail and presently

sought refuge in a coulee. Unsaddling, he hobbled the pinto, an affront resented with peevish nips and indignant snortings, and crept back to where he could look out over the prairie. He was taking no chances, even with the faithful Whiskers.

To the north-west lay the Inverted T. To the south-east, rising boldly and incredibly from the prairie, was the dark mass of the Cypress Hills. South and west and north-east ranged the herds, scatterings of them visible from where he lay, though they were miles apart. Each herd, he noticed, had its punchers on guard: the ranchers were taking measures against this new outbreak of rustling.

He had no idea what he expected, but his thoughts centred about the Inverted T. In some unformed way he was convinced that the solution of the problem he faced lay in that direction, yet he could not see how that was possible.

It was ten o'clock when, far to the north-west, a pair of riders came into view. They were headed straight for where he lay, and, after watching them for a few minutes, he rolled back and hurried to where Whiskers quietly fed. Nervously his crooked eyes darted about. The coulee was deep enough, but too wide to be a safe hiding-place. Would the pair coming towards him detour to avoid it, or would its very width tempt them to cut through?

Whatever the answer there was nothing to do but wait and hope. He might have ridden away, but above all, he did not wish to be seen in flight. And so, leading Whiskers to the spot where grew the longest grass, he signalled her to lie down. Her spotted flanks, in themselves the best camouflage, he screened with great handfuls of grass. Then he hurried back to watch.

The two riders were close now, closer than he expected, and he rolled swiftly to the bottom of the coulee and flattened in the grass.

He had recognized the riders almost from the moment he saw them—Spud Taylor and Andy Farren. The foreman would be on his way to one of the ranch herds; and Andy, never content when off a horse, had come with him. Escape appeared hopeless, and Blue Pete gritted his teeth together with chagrin and disappointment.

But almost at the edge of the coulee Spud, in the lead, turned aside to skirt it. Discovery even then would have been certain had not the cowboy turned his head at the last moment to speak over his shoulder to Andy.

It was Andy who saw him. For a moment he looked straight down into Blue Pete's eyes. Then, with never a sign of recognition, he turned his head swiftly away and spurred forward. But as he rode he thrust out a foot and tapped with his quirt one of the silver spurs that adorned his heels.

When the danger was past Blue Pete rolled on his back and stared at the sky. There was something about it that puzzled him. He had sometimes vaguely wondered at the friendship that existed between Andy and Spud. And the puzzle of it became more definite now that Andy had deliberately refused to betray him to his friend. Blue Pete had a shrewd idea that the Inspector was anxious about him, and Spud's presence in town, and the accusation the foreman had hurled at him, indicated almost certainly that the Mounted Police had been informed of the disappearance of the white-stockinged broncho. Andy would be certain to know all about it, yet he had passed him by when he was so evidently in hiding, and had given no sign.

Was Andy, then, something more than the irresponsible youngster the district considered him? It was a question Blue Pete had asked himself more than once before.

. . . . .

Day succeeded day. Not a break in the teeming sunlight by day, nor in the still, cold starlight of the nights. The isolated life of the prairie continued outwardly unchanged, except for the closer guard kept on the wandering herds.

But reports began to be spread of a mysterious rider who was heard but seldom seen even as a fleeting shadow. Night-herders—usually of the Inverted T—spoke of strange confusion and uneasiness among the cattle, of uncanny shadows that came and went in the darkness, of unseen rustlings and the beat of a horse's hoofs. Now and then a night-rider would frantically seek companionship, ashamed to speak of how he felt; but in the darkness his hands would tremble, and the songs he sang to the herds would be broken and uneasy. Ranch buildings were locked with new keys, corral bars chained. Blinds were kept drawn, and in the Inverted T bunk-house rifles were kept loaded and ready to hand.

They knew what it was—or they thought they did. Blue Pete, will-o'-the-wisp that he always was, was somewhere about. The Mounted Police were after him, yet no one had so much as caught a glimpse of him. The half-breed became a *loup-garou* on the ranges, and weird stories, made more credible by the mystery that had always hung over him, drifted into Medicine Hat.

Inspector Barker heard most of them, and, though he made allowances for Blue Pete's reputation, the best he could make of the stories was bad.

Sergeant Mahon kept riding. He, too, heard the stories, usually before they reached the Inspector's ears, and they worried him to sleeplessness. In the very least of the tales there threatened an end to their companionship, and that would rob him of the brightest patch of colour connected with his duties. The narrow margin the half-breed had always left between methods that could be defended and



sheer lawlessness, in his association with the Mounted Police, promised a final breach in that association at the slightest new offence. Blue Pete had become a liability.

That the Mounted Police would get him sooner or later the Sergeant did not doubt. They always did get their man—though the popular phrase always peeved them, since it savoured of affectation and placed such a burden of responsibility on their shoulders. And when they did get Blue Pete, what then?

That eventuality never once entered Blue Pete's troubled head. His one dread was failure in the task he had set himself. For during those trying days he worked without a lead and seemed to be getting nowhere.

There was ample reason for the jumpy nerves at the Inverted T, for seldom were the ranch buildings out of his sight by day. By night, after the supplies Mira had wrapped up for him were exhausted, he was forced to forage where he could—sometimes from the neglected saddles of careless cowboys, sometimes from chuck-wagons—even with the cook asleep beneath them—sometimes from cook-houses.

He had, too, helped himself to a cowboy's rifle, and he managed to shoot an antelope.

That day, desperate, depressed, almost ready to confess defeat, he took to the Cypress Hills.

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN THE CYPRESS HILLS

HE had been there in the Hills once before in those lonely days, but only for a few hours. He had watched Inspector Barker ride into the Hills from around Elk Lake, and he thought he understood the purpose of that unusual trip. He had followed. When the Inspector lost himself, the half-breed had led him out by riding before him, firing his rifle now and then, always keeping just out of sight.

And as he watched the Inspector, freed at last, ride moodily down to the open prairie, Blue Pete's heart ached, for he read correctly that hanging head and those drooping shoulders. They were open enemies now, and the Inspector recognized it.

There in the Hills he would have felt easier but for two things. He knew he was safe. No one else knew that tangle so well as he, for it had been his refuge in many a chase, his jumping-off place for running rustled stock across the border to Montana. That tumbled tract of hills and hollows, of forest and tiny lakes, one hundred miles from east to west, a dozen from north to south, had crammed into a few months of his life, danger, bloodshed, tragedy, and almost death for himself. Now, hunted by the Mounted Police, there hung about the fringes of his mind a disturbing fear that the very vividness of the association connected with the Cypress Hills might push him across the border to the old life of lawlessness that still held a haunting attraction for him.

That was one cause of uneasiness. The other was the Indians. He had seen them ride into the Hills—four armed braves, the mystery of whose purpose was increased by the fact that, like himself, they kept as much as possible to the depressions that dodged about over the prairie.

Curious, he decided to learn more about them.

He had scarcely made up his mind to it when the course was definitely decided for him by the sight of another rider making in the same direction.

It was Mira.

She rode openly, following the southward trail to its nearest point to the Hills, then branching boldly east and rounding the shores of Elk Lake, to disappear up the slope into the trees.

That in itself would not have greatly concerned him, though he knew what was in her mind, were it not for the presence of the Indians somewhere in those same Hills. Mira was familiar with the Hills. She too, had used them for rustling; she would not lose herself as had the Inspector. But the Indians introduced another factor that must be considered. They made everything look different, so different that a throb of fear shot through him. Their dislike of him extended to everything of his; and there in the Cypress Hills was the perfect spot to express that dislike. And Mira could not have known they were there before her.

Other movement about the Hills had interested the half-breed in those days of his concealment. Andy Farren, after circling with seeming purposelessness about the prairie, had suddenly turned into the Hills. And Lee Cutten had cut across the prairie far to the south-west—not the most direct route from his farm, by any means—and had remained all one day in the Hills.

Still Blue Pete delayed. He feared that, while he followed the devious course he must take to reach the Hills unseen, Mira might come out unknown to

him. For one whole day he never took his eyes from the Hills. Andy appeared just as the sun sank, and rode rapidly away to where Spud shared the night-herd duties. But no Mira.

That night Blue Pete could wait no longer. Riding straight to the south, he rounded the western end of the Hills and turned east to enter from the south. If the Indians were interested in him—until he knew better he must assume they were—they would not look for him in that direction. The thirty or so miles of prairie that intervened between the Hills and the Border of Montana were usually deserted. The grass was not good there, and it was too near the Border to risk the rustlers who could strike and disappear in the darkness, with the Line between Alberta and Montana stopping pursuit.

He rode carelessly, partly because he expected nothing, partly because he had other things on his mind. He planned to follow along to the east for a dozen miles before turning north to the Hills.

Suddenly Whiskers's head jerked up. It was a clear, starlit night, but nothing more than vague shapes was visible two score yards away. At almost the same moment Blue Pete heard it—the drumming of hoofs coming from the direction of the Hills. He drew the pinto in and sat listening, estimating the route the unseen riders followed. Deciding that he dare not go farther, he waited.

They came on, invisible but definitely more audible, with no sound of voices. They rode at a fast lope, steadily cutting down the distance to the Border. Not a hundred yards before him they passed. Blue Pete's veins tingled with excitement.

He had actually turned Whiskers's head to follow, when a thought struck him and, with a sigh, he pulled up and swung about to the north. With a twist of his lips he removed his sombrero and scratched his thick crop of black hair.

"Gor-swizzle! Ef on'y I hed time tuh foller!"

With his mind made up not to be led too far, he did follow for several miles, urged by a consuming curiosity. Not a word was spoken by the riders in front. They might have been ghosts, or stray bronchos. But the half-breed knew, even without the creak of leather, that there were riders in the saddles.

With only sufficient night left to reach the Hills, he turned back.

His thoughts returned to the Indians. What were they doing in the Hills? What could be in their minds that made them come so furtively? And armed! If only Mira had not thrust herself into the affair! Now he had two cares on his mind, either sufficiently worrying to require his whole attention. For he had no intention that Mira should see him. Her presence in a way annoyed as well as worried him, for she introduced a complication that was bound to handicap him in his plan of spying on the Indians.

The two score and more miles he had ridden during the hours of darkness had not fatigued either him or Whiskers, though they had run the margin thin in reaching the cover of the Hills by night. Just within the trees he waited for better light, for in the darkness the Indians, until he located them, would have all the advantage.

First of all he must find Mira. And to find her without revealing himself to her constituted a problem. He had a rather settled conviction that she would not support him in what he had in mind. She had forced herself back to the conventions of a ranch-owner, of an existence she was determined to accept for them both, with all its comparative dullness. Besides, she was white, and in spite of their affection and of the similarity of their tastes in so many things, the difference in the colour of their skin often came to the surface, colouring their judgment. To her the mere fact that he was hiding from the Mounted Police would

outweigh anything he might say to defend himself, for, above everything else, she stuck stubbornly to her task of making of him a law-abiding rancher like herself.

With daylight he pushed forward. Picking his way northward on foot, his great spurs in his pocket to prevent the slight jingle of the rowels as he walked, Whiskers following almost as silently behind, he was oppressed with a sense of lurking danger. Never, except as a warning that others were about, had he heard the forest so silent. The Indians could not be far away. Eyes and ears open, he prowled more or less aimlessly about, his crooked glance searching the ground for some tell-tale sign.

He had no delusions about the danger he was in. Apart from the feeling the Indians had towards him, he knew their cleverness on the trail, though a generation or two of indolence had dulled it; and he was acquainted with their patience. They might be lying anywhere, too still to be heard, too clever in concealment to be visible. But he trusted to the sense of impending danger that had so often served him so well.

By mid-afternoon he was deep in the Hills. Though he had come no more than a half-dozen miles as a crow would fly, the devious route he had followed, the ups and downs of the hills, had stretched the distance he had covered to many times as far, and the frequent pauses to listen, the slow pace he maintained, had left him not a moment of rest. He had not even stopped to eat, though he had strapped to the cantle of his saddle the choicest cuts of the antelope he had shot.

A darkly shaded, sombre lake barred his way. He had come on it from an unaccustomed direction, and for a moment he failed to recognize it. But he was keenly aware of something more ominous than the dark lake. Danger!

At a sign Whiskers lay down, and Blue Pete, his .45 Colt in his hand—he left the rifle with Whiskers,

since it cramped his movements—crept towards the lake, straight in the face of the danger he felt to lurk somewhere near. At the border of the lake, screened by a low-spread cedar tree, he lay down. Hours passed and he had not moved. The danger that threatened had not come nearer. But neither had it retired. With the patience of his Indian blood he waited.

Late in the afternoon he remembered Whiskers and hurried back to her. She still lay where he had left her, and her tail whisked petulantly at his neglect. Leading her away, he found a small valley where she might feed, and he left her there and returned to the lake, approaching it from another side. The sense of peril increased as he advanced, annoying him with its mystery.

The shadows lengthened. Above his head the sky was still clear, but the sun was low in the north-west, and the forest was growing rapidly black.

A sound from somewhere ahead of him sent him cowering behind a thick evergreen. There he lay down. The sound he had heard had come from a cluster of thick shrubs not forty yards before him. It was no more than the rustling of foliage, as if some animal were moving about. There were wolves in the Hills, as the surrounding ranches knew to their cost. But a man could not hope to creep so close to a wolf.

Suddenly a branch snapped, and a hoof pawed at the ground.

Blue Pete smiled with relief. He wormed his way nearer.

## CHAPTER XX

### TRAILED BY THE INDIANS

CAREFULLY he parted the branches. It was darker in the thicket, but he could make out the shapes of the four horses. They were, he knew, the Indians' ponies. Cautiously he worked his way around until he found the opening into the thicket.

It was an ideal hiding-place, and had not one of the ponies been impatient, he might well have passed within a few feet without being aware of them. To his mind it provided another warning: whatever the braves had in mind, it called for the utmost secrecy, and that in itself made it worth investigating.

For a few moments he considered what to do next. That the Indians were somewhere close by was evident. The fact that he had no idea where they were, and why they were somewhere in hiding and did not wish that he should know about them, added to the danger that overhung him.

The nervous pony pawed again. Blue Pete looked carefully around, could detect nothing threatening, and crept into the thicket, murmuring soothingly. He had a way with horses, and, after a single low snort of enquiry, they showed no fear. Rubbing a hand over the nose of the nearest pony, his other hand felt about the saddle. It encountered a parcel. Another saddle yielded a second parcel, and with the two in his hand he tiptoed from the thicket, a wide grin on his swarthy face. He knew by the feel and the odour that he would



not starve now for a few days, and it struck him suddenly how hungry he was.

He did not go far away. Swinging into a tree a dozen yards from the thicket, he settled himself down to wait.

More than an hour passed. Complete darkness had settled over the forest when, almost beneath him, sounded the soft pad of moccasined feet. They had come from the direction of the lake. With the instinctive caution and silence of the Indian they passed so close to him that he could have reached down and touched them. So still they were, so uncannily inhuman in their furtiveness, that they might have been ghosts.

With every passing moment Blue Pete's wonder grew. What were they about? Why had they lain all day off there beside the lake, certainly waiting and watching for something—for someone? Were they aware that he was in the Hills? From the prairie he had seen them come, but he could not be certain they had not come on his trail some time through the day.

But why should they be interested in him? He had no answer to that, though it did not disturb his conviction that they were.

He recalled their rifles, and the thought sent a thrill through him. Even when he had seen them on the prairie they were certainly trying to conceal the rifles, carrying them along the side of their mounts as they rode together. Everything combined to warn him to be cautious.

The group had passed through into the thicket where they had left their ponies. The animals were utterly still now. No sign of fear, no uneasiness; for the Indian pony can smell the Indian afar off. Sometimes less sensitive noses have the gift—or the weakness.

Suddenly one of the braves grunted. An expressive sound, combining surprise, excitement, and anger.

He knew what they had discovered. A short, tense silence ensued, followed by low, excited ejaculations.

Though he understood their language, he could not make out what was said, partly because among themselves the Indians evolve a language of grunts and exclamations and tight phrases that depend for their meaning on every sound and a local interpretation.

A match snapped into flame.

In its light Blue Pete saw, with a start and a feeling of disgust, one of the braves—he recognized Grey Coyote—bend over the ground. Had he left a trail they could follow? He had not thought of that. He might have dropped to the ground and run for it, but curiosity, the thrill of increasing peril, and the contempt he always felt for the Indian, held him in his place. At any rate, they themselves had passed directly beneath him, overtracking the route he had followed from the thicket.

It was that that saved him. For a few paces Grey Coyote appeared to have found something, then, with a grunt of disappointment, he stopped. Had he even raised his face in the light of the match, he could not have missed the half-breed over his head.

Blue Pete's respect for Grey Coyote increased when, after moving about for a time, the Indian picked up the trail by which he had arrived at the thicket. An audible grunt of satisfaction sent the four braves off along it. And now a tardy caution had come into their movements. Match succeeded match, but only after long intervals of silent listening in the darkness; and then in the flame he could see only Grey Coyote. The other three had evidently spread out, keeping beyond the light, acting as outrunners and scouts.

Blue Pete let himself down and followed.

He had to be careful, for only by his ears could he hope to avoid the three scouts. And his ears, keen as they were, told him little. He stood still, afraid to move.

Suddenly he remembered Whiskers. And Grey Coyote was working directly towards the little ravine where the pinto had been left! Turning back, the half-breed skirted widely to the right, planning to get to Whiskers before them and lead her away.

Just when he judged he was distant enough to quicken his pace, his heart leaped into his mouth. A shadow had stepped before him.

"Pete! Pete!"

It was Mira.

"S-s-s!" It was the hissing warning of their rustling days, and Mira responded instantly. She stood stockstill. And softly Blue Pete retreated, fading back into the darkness.

"Pete!" The plaintive, appealing whisper cut through him.

He did not reply. Gripping his fists, he kept on, hoping the Indians had heard nothing.

He found the ravine where he had left Whiskers.

But the round-about course he had followed, and the meeting with Mira, had delayed him. As he hung over the ravine, making certain the way was clear, he could hear someone creeping along below. And Whiskers was there somewhere! Instantly his gun was out, and a shot shattered the silence. The echo still rang through the forest as several rifles answered, the bullets whistling over his head where he lay. The Indians had brought their rifles with them from their saddles.

A deep, ominous silence followed. Blue Pete dare not move, for the shots had come from all about him.

Suddenly from the other side of the ravine a single rifle-shot rang out. Blue Pete chuckled. That was Mira. It saved the situation, for the Indians could be heard scurrying off through the underbrush, thinking themselves surrounded.

Blue Pete placed two fingers between his lips and whistled twice. In answer a horse plunged across

the ravine, and Whiskers clawed her way up the steep bank.

"Pete! Pete!" It was a frank, full-bodied cry this time, carrying across the ravine.

Blue Pete pressed his hands tightly over his lips as he rose to meet the pinto.

## CHAPTER XXI

### TRAILERS TRAILED

**F**OR a couple of days Blue Pete thought of little but the Indians and Mira. The four braves were after him, definitely and stubbornly and angrily seeking to get him, though he could not be certain that that was their original purpose. There was always the chance that the theft of their food, and the persistent nuisance he made of himself, might have driven them to take after him; but the result was the same.

He found little difficulty at first in eluding them. There were even times when, in maddening contempt of them, he left a plain trail, in order that he might lie unseen and watch them gravely at work.

Whiskers appeared to enjoy it almost as much as her master. Long trailing had taught her to play the half-breed's game, and she would stand with nose thrust out, her lips curled back from her teeth in a soundless laugh as the abortive search continued all about them.

But at the end of the second day Blue Pete wearied; it ceased to be amusing. The Indians never let up. They had nothing to fear, they probably knew, and the grudge they had to pay increased with every hour of failure. What the half-breed did not know was that the backing of the Mounted Police, and the reward the Inspector had offered, were certain to keep them on the trail until they had him.

Then, too, Mira was still somewhere in the Hills. He knew it by sundry signs, though he had not seen her. If only she would go back to the ranch and leave him free for the Indians!

The persistence of the braves finally drove him to leave Whiskers in hiding in a cave, while he continued to dog their trail on foot. By this time he had settled down to that, forgetting everything else. The cave where he concealed the pinto was one where he had dragged himself after Dutch Henry's murderous bullet had shattered his shoulder. He had gone there to die. But Mira had found him and nursed him back to life, while the Mounted Police searched everywhere for him.

It was a cave with mingled tragedy and tender memories, for he had often used it since when conditions drove him to the Hills. It was a perfect retreat. Thick vines hung down the face of the cliff before it, and a small stream coursed along immediately beneath the vines; so that horse and man, given food, could remain there indefinitely.

But on the fourth day, returning to the cave, he discovered that someone had been there, and by certain signs he convinced himself that it was Mira. Fearing she might be lying in wait for him inside, he waited until night, then, at the whistle Whiskers knew so well, he brought the pinto pushing through the vines to him. He did not know if Mira was there. The Hills abounded in caves, and to one of them he rode.

In some ways the new cave was even more convenient than the other, since close by feed for Whiskers grew luxuriantly in a damp hollow, and water was close at hand.

During that time he lost touch with the Indians. But by noon the following day he picked up their trail once more. He discovered then that, aware that he was following them, they were covering their trail

and confusing it; and for a long time he searched in vain.

Then he came unexpectedly on their ponies. From there the rest was simple.

They had built themselves a fire in a hollow beside a babbling stream and were cooking themselves bacon, squatted on their heels before the blaze, the bacon held over the flames on long, pointed sticks. Apparently they were satisfied that they had thrown him off their trail or frightened him from the Hills.

Blue Pete returned to the ponies. The rifle he had stolen from the cowboy had served its purpose in directing the Inspector from the Hills and in the killing of the antelope, but to his consternation it left him with only one cartridge. And even that was denied him when he discovered that somehow the weapon had been joggled from the saddle-holster during Whiskers's scramble from the ravine the night the Indians almost had their hands on her. That was why, looking the Indian ponies over, his eye lit up at the sight of a rifle in one of the holsters.

He wanted that rifle, and he could only hope that the magazine was full. But for a stranger to approach the ponies by daylight was a risky venture. They were small, wild creatures, typical Indian ponies that would have nothing to do with a white man, tough as leather, vicious by nature. A stranger they might resent with protestations loud enough to reach their masters. But Blue Pete was not to be deterred.

They eyed him suspiciously as he sidled towards them. And perhaps they divined his Indian blood, or it may have been his knowledge of horses that enabled him to reach them without alarming them. Lifting the rifle from the holster, he retired.

Elated not only at having a rifle in his hands once more, but visioning the discomfiture of the Indians, from a safe distance he sent a ringing "yip-ee" through the trees.

As usual, calmer reflection disgusted him with himself. At any rate, the rifle could be of little real value. He could not imagine why he should feel the need for it, for surely the Indians would not make it necessary to defend himself in any such violent way. So that all he had succeeded in doing was to make them angrier and more determined—more dangerous. Also they would be more on their guard against him.

Back once more in the cave, he lay down to think things over. He saw that he was getting nowhere, that the Indians, whatever their purpose, could have nothing to do, so far as he could figure it out, with the task he had set himself; that, as usual, he had forgotten that task in a more immediate excitement.

As the evening advanced he became uneasy, even nervous. Something kept driving him to action, yet he knew now what he could do.

"Gor-swizzle, ole gal," he muttered to the pinto, "I wish yuh cud talk. I'm jes' plumb sheered—an' yer none too frisky yerself."

He concluded that, until Mira was found and got rid of, he had no time for anything else. He knew she was still somewhere in the Hills, and he knew that, until something further happened, she would remain there until she found him. Yet he dare not let that happen. It was, of course, distressing to her to know nothing of the reason for his disappearance, but it would be more distressing if in face of her opposition he persisted in pursuing the course he had set himself. That would be distressing to them both.

With the approach of darkness, urged by an anxiety he could not resist, he rose and left the cave.

Off through the trees he could see a small lake glinting back the lighted sky. At the far edge a deer was drinking, its beautiful head rising from the water



every few seconds in swift, searching suspicion. The light fell softly over its greyish-red head. Then it saw him. But it did not run, staring back at him, still as a statue.

Instinctively his rifle rose to his shoulder. But he lowered it immediately.

"No, sir," he murmured, "not ef I was a durn' sight hungrier. Anyways," he added, as he plodded off in the opposite direction, "them Injuns 'ud hear."

But at the top of the bank he turned and looked back. The slinking shape of a timber-wolf slid out from the trees not far from the deer. The latter must have heard, for with head flung back it leaped away. The wolf bounded after it. Blue Pete's rifle jerked to his shoulder, but luckily, before he could pull the trigger the wolf was gone.

For only those few seconds his mind was distracted from the cloud of foreboding that had settled over him. It returned now with double force. It must be Mira. And with the thought he struck away swiftly through the forest in the direction where he had seen the Indians last. Mira—and the Indians! They would have no mercy on her if they overtook her, partly because she was his wife, partly because they must know it was her shot that had sent them to panicky flight when they so nearly had their hands on Whiskers. And Mira had little idea how mean an Indian could be where the laws of the white man were not in evidence to restrain him.

His restless nervousness brought a cold perspiration to his forehead, and he dashed it away with an impatient hand. On and on he went, prowling through the trees, his ears keened to every sound.

That was why he heard the drumming of hoof-beats while they were still far away. The Indians—he knew it instantly—were riding at top speed, much too fast for safe riding in the Hills. It meant—what? The

sound rose and fell with the hills and valleys that crossed their course. They were making diagonally across before him, and he started away at top speed to intercept them.

Suddenly every sound ceased, and through the Hills fell the silence that came only with a frightened animal life. No singing birds, no rustling of dead leaves, no cracking twigs. Everything listening, watching. Blue Pete ran on.

Then, over the crest of a hill before him came the sound of sullen, guttural voices.

And through them Mira's!

Blue Pete glided breathlessly forward.

He saw them then. The four braves sat on their heels in an open space before a low cliff. And with her back to the cliff Mira sat facing them. They glowered at her. She faced them defiantly, and now and then a hand reached down to rub an ankle. Her clothing along her left side was stained with damp mould, and some of it protruded from the top of her left riding-boot.

Grey Coyote, his chin almost resting on his antelope-skin-covered knee, grunted rudely.

"Huh! You no hurt. No fool Grey Coyote."

"Glad to know your name," said Mira. "I'll remember. Do you think you'd have caught me if I hadn't been thrown when my bronc fell?" She threw the leader a contemptuous glance and brushed some of the stain from her clothing.

"Why you run away?"

"Why did you chase me?"

The Indians gabbled among themselves. Blue Pete's rifle slid forward. In that moment four rash Indian braves were near the Happy Hunting Ground. But there were certain things the half-breed wished to know, and he could afford to wait. Mira was in no immediate danger. Carefully

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he commenced to work his way around the hollow behind her.

Grey Coyote was speaking again. "Where your man?"

"I wish I knew."

"You know. You shoot at Indians three-four nights ago."

Mira laughed scornfully. "If I'd shot at you, Grey Coyote, you wouldn't be here."

"Huh! You shoot," persisted the Indian sullenly. "Your man here in Hills."

"Then why don't you find him?"

Blue Pete heard every word. Mira was rash. She did not know the Indians: it was dangerous to anger them like that.

"Blue Pete no good here," Grey Coyote said. "No place for white man."

"Why do you wish to find him?" Mira asked.

"We find him," was Grey Coyote's only answer. "You tell us where—what he does here."

He hopped nearer and caught the girl by the wrist. She fought to release herself, furiously indignant, and the struggle threw them both off balance, for Mira was strong.

Blue Pete's rifle pointed once more.

But Mira had broken free. And Grey Coyote, unnerved a little by her unexpected resistance, did not return to the attack.

The Indians conversed among themselves once more. It gave the unseen observer time to weigh the situation. He saw that, save in emergency, he could not afford to shoot to kill. Mira's rescue was sufficient, and there were other ways to effect that. He felt certain she was safe for a few minutes, and he turned away and commenced to scout about for their ponies.

He found them. But at the moment he caught sight of them the familiar sense of imminent danger that

had come so frequently to his rescue swept over him. He set his back against a tree and shot his crooked eyes about him.

They came to rest on a dark face, on a pair of baleful eyes, not twenty yards away. On a rifle that pointed straight at him!

## CHAPTER XXII

### CAPTURED

HE knew what had happened. While he searched for the horses, one of the Indians had come for them and had stumbled on him in time to get the drop on him.

Without a word the Indian made a motion to him to back towards the spot where he had left his companions. There was nothing to do but obey, and the half-breed, dropping his rifle to leave his hands free, raised them above his head. In there in the Hills, where anything they might do would never be discovered, the Indians were not likely to take a chance with a man they hated so intensely. Besides, there was Mira.

Slowly he felt his way backward, reaching out stumblingly with each foot as if with no thought but to do what he was told. But his mind worked rapidly. The other Indians could not yet be aware of what was happening. His captor was probably exulting in their surprise when the half-breed backed unannounced into sight.

But Blue Pete had other plans.

At the moment when he figured that another two or three steps would bring him into view of the Indians, he sprang to action. So swiftly did his hands drop, his .45 flash out, and the shot shatter the silence, that the Indian scarcely caught the movement.

It was an old stunt of Blue Pete's, a dexterous lightning movement mastered by a very few old-time cow-

punchers. The right hand flies to the gun and draws, and the left hand "fans" the hammer more swiftly than the finger of the right hand could pull the trigger. On occasion it was part of the trick to have the hands raised innocently immediately afterwards. So swiftly is it done that the eye fails to follow what has happened.

At the same instant Blue Pete leaped behind a tree.

But he was in no immediate danger. The bullet caught the surprised Indian in the forearm, and his rifle dropped to the ground.

Blue Pete was off like a flash. Bending low, grabbing as he passed the rifle he had dropped, he made for the horses. There were five of them, one Mira's Whitey. With a slash of his knife he cut them loose, leaping on Whitey's back. The Indian ponies were already in mad flight.

From the depression where the Indians squatted about Mira had come only a single excited grunt, then they were away, vanishing like wraiths. The injured Indian, too, had dropped out of sight. Then, one by one four dusky faces peered out towards the stampeding horses. But Blue Pete was well away.

And back into their furious faces he flung the old exultant "Yip-ee!"

He did not ride far. It was growing dark, and in a cluster of trees he dismounted and tied Whitey securely. Then he was off, back towards where he had last seen Mira.

He had no idea what he would find. But he felt confident that if Mira was not too badly injured she would have seized the opportunity to escape. He tried to follow the workings of the Indian mind. What would they do. He did not think they would consider immediately following him or the ponies. More furious now than ever with him, would they take it out on Mira? The thought threw him into a panic, and he hurried forward.

It was the panic that led him so easily into the trap. A shot slit the silence, and a bullet slashed through the branches behind which he happened to have taken cover. Instantly he flattened against the ground as another shot ripped from the right. He was surrounded.

He could see nothing of the Indians. It was almost dark, and they were well concealed, holding him at their mercy. His first thought was to fight it out. But all that mattered was Mira. Had she escaped, or was she still captive?

There was only one way to make certain.

With a shout he rose boldly to his feet and advanced into the open, hands raised.

They must have suspected another trick, for nothing happened for fully a minute. He thought he knew what it was held them back, and he drew his Colt and dropped it on the ground.

Then from behind a tree Grey Coyote walked slowly out to him, gun pointing. At the same time another Indian approached from either side. Keeping him covered, Grey Coyote gave orders to his companions to search the half-breed. While this was going on, the wounded Indian stamped up and with a snarl struck the helpless man across the face.

Blue Pete crouched, arms extended, teeth bared. But the cold grin on Grey Coyote's face warned him in time, and he relaxed. The Indians would like nothing better than an excuse to shoot him down. The insult could wait.

All the time he kept looking about for Mira. And with the thought that the four Indians would not be there if she were captive, his spirits rose. Grey Coyote saw the smile and grunted angrily.

"What you do in the Hills?" he demanded.

"W'y don' yuh ast muh wife?" he countered.

The scheme worked. "She no here. Sneak away. We find her, too." The Indian stepped nearer and

leered into Blue Pete's face. "You shoot. Now we shoot. All right."

It was almost dark now, and Grey Coyote gave a sharp order to his two uninjured companions. They disappeared. In a few minutes they were back, their hands filled with long, rubbery vines. Blue Pete knew those vines—supple as ropes and as strong, and cutting as they dried. They grew in the damp hollows, curling about stumps and trees, suffocating the life from everything they clutched.

Grey Coyote laughed harshly. "You no get away," he said, and proceeded to justify his assurance.

"Wot yuh wan' 'th muh?" Blue Pete growled, as they bound his arms behind his back with merciless tightness.

Grey Coyote sneered and laughed. It puzzled the half-breed, for the Indian seldom laughs. A bandage was bound over his eyes and he was shoved ahead. Two of the Indians departed to find their ponies, while Grey Coyote and the wounded Indian, his arm now bound up, thrust the half-breed before them. Blindfolded, and unbalanced by his bound arms, he stumbled along.

"You fall," crowed Grey Coyote. "We tie you all up and leave you. You starve."

Twisting an erratic course, Blue Pete could only vaguely follow the route they took. At last they stopped. By the echo he knew they stood close to a cliff, and then he was pushed against the rock and told to lie down. When he obeyed, they bound his legs. He was helpless; and with the drying of the vines they would tighten.

All the time his mind worked fumblingly. Mira was free, and that fact relieved him of his greatest worry. But the purpose of the Indians had become more bewildering. Had they been hired to get him out of the way? If that were so, it must be the ranchers. But few of the ranchers he knew would



favour such a drastic, murderous scheme. And those who could think of it would never trust the Indians on such a dangerous mission. No one could guess how much they might talk.

Darkness had blanked out everything long ago, even had Blue Pete not been blindfolded. The damp odour of night filled the air about him. A stream gurgled somewhere near.

Not long after they had finished binding his legs the other two Indians returned with the ponies. The animals would not run far; they were too faithful to their owners. Blue Pete heard the driving of picket-pins, and he wondered how far the sound would carry. At any rate, they had him now, so that noise made no difference; they had the Hills to themselves at last. He could hear them moving about, smell the cooking of bacon.

"Wot yuh goin' tuh do 'th muh?" he grunted, as an Indian came to him. "I ain' done nothin'—jes' a li'l flesh-wound, thet."

The Indian made an angry sound and kicked him in the side.

Far away a timber-wolf howled. The fire died down; the Indians came to lie near him against the cliff, where an overhanging ledge protected them from wind and dew. The sounds of the night forest commenced fitfully—the twitter of unseen, sleepy birds, the patter of delicate feet, perhaps a curious deer drinking at the stream. A flock of wild geese honked a tardy course northward. The Indians slept.

Suddenly a tingle ran through Blue Pete's body. He held his breath. From the medley of sleepy sounds emerged the distant double hoot of the screech-owl.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE ESCAPE

THE blood raced beneath his scalp. Noiselessly he shifted his head towards the open side. The silence about him seemed to deepen. Not a brave moved; he could hear their steady breathing.

The owl hooted again. It was nearer now, dismal, listless.

Blue Pete lay still, very still. He might have been asleep. But in the darkness a smile twitched at his lips. Three of the Indians, he figured, lay asleep about him. The fourth was outside guarding the horses.

The hooting was not repeated. Blue Pete wondered if hope had deceived his ears.

From out beside the little stream a dull thud reached him. For a moment it puzzled him. His heart pounded. Inch by inch he commenced to roll away from the cliff, feeling with hip and bound feet for every loose stone that might betray him.

A hand touched his shoulder. It slid down to the vines that bound his arms and a knife cut slowly through. Into his freed hands a knife was slipped, and he removed the blindfold and cut his legs free. A rifle was placed across his knees, and his own six-shooter—he knew it the moment he touched it. Turning on his knees, he crawled away.

Near the top of the trees the sky was bright with an infant moon. Slight shadows fell across the open spaces. The shapes of the four ponies were plain

enough. And there, stretched on his back, lay the Indian guard, his body oddly twisted. Blue Pete hesitated, shuddered, and went on.

Mira moved away before him. He knew who it was, had known it from that first hooting. He might have trusted her to come to his rescue. He reached forward and drew her back, leading steadily on. Neither spoke.

Presently he said, his throat dry, his shoulders bent miserably:

"Did yuh—kill 'im, Mira?"

All the way it had troubled him. Had Mira been forced to do that for him? And what would Inspector Barker say?

Mira laughed. "Not a chance, Pete. I knocked him out with a rock, that was all."

He led on, choosing the course. She did not question it. Presently he stopped.

"Whitey is thar—in thar."

She laughed. "I knew it. I found him. Where's Whiskers?"

He did not answer. They stopped at Whitey's side. Suddenly he caught her in his arms and lifted her to the saddle.

"Git goin'," he ordered. Then, pleadingly: "Fer God's sake gi' muh a chance, Mira. Git 'way from th' Hills."

"Pete," she pleaded, "Pete, what are you doing running from the Mounties?"

He snuffled in an embarrassed way. "Le'e muh 'lone, Mira, please. I ken' do nothin' 'th you tuh look after. They'll git muh shure. Le'e muh 'lone."

Before she could find words for the worry that almost made her sick he was gone, sliding off into the darkness.

Once she called his name, sobbing, then turned and rode sadly away.

Blue Pete plunged blindly through the night. And

suddenly he was aware that he was back almost where he had started from. Under the cliff where he stood lay the sleeping Indians, secure in the belief that he lay helpless beside them. He crawled to the edge and leaned over. He could just make out the ponies staked beside the stream. He could make out, too, the form of the Indian Mira had been forced to knock unconscious.

As he watched, the Indian moved and sat up. A low groan escaped him. Then with a frightened grunt he rose and hurried to his companions.

Blue Pete picked himself up and went. Presently he pulled up. He felt buoyant, elated, reckless—as he always did when he came out on top.

“Yip-ee!”

The taunting cry carried to the Indians and set Grey Coyote's teeth grinding. It reached even to Mira where, far to the north, she rode wearily on. She shuddered and pulled Whitey up, turning in the saddle. Then, her eyes wet, she went on—northward, ever northward. In that direction lay home.

Whiskers welcomed with a low whinny his return to the cave, but Blue Pete seemed not to notice. With an exclamation of disgust he threw himself down and glowered at the faint, mottled light beyond the concealing vines at the mouth of the cave.

“Me a 'tective! Me! Jes' plumb loco, that's wot. . . . Wonder wot Mira'd say.”

The question sent his thoughts flying in another direction, and he rose, saddled Whiskers, and rode away. After striking straight west for a time, he turned northward. He had given the spot where the Indians had held him captive a wide berth, so that he felt safe enough. He rode as fast as the darkness permitted.

But by the time he reached the margin of the Hills the prairie lay bathed in early sunlight. For a long

time he stood, just within the trees, staring out over the vast yellow scene. Far to the west a solitary rider moved slowly away. Mira had left him free for his task. Blue Pete sighed happily.

In the clear light he could make out two or three feeding herds, though they were many miles away. From where he stood the rolls in the prairie flattened out to an unfamiliar plane, and he regarded it for some time with a puzzled smile on his face. Then, with shaking head, he turned straight westward, keeping to the trees.

His course brought him to the western end of the Hills. There, after scanning the prairie carefully in every direction, he pushed ahead, dropping out into the open. Choosing the depressions, he went north-westward.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A PRAIRIE ROMANCE

**G**YPSY FARREN, in flaming yellow buckskin breeches, a dull yellow blouse, buckskin gauntlets, and a white sombrero only slightly smaller than Andy's, emerged from her bedroom, flung her father a kiss, and started for the door.

Don Farren, sunk in an easy-chair, with the latest copy of the *London Times* in his hand, raised his face and peered vacantly at her for a moment through his glasses.

"Where to now, Gypsy?"

"Riding." She added, her face to the door: "Ching thinks the chuck-wagon may be running short. I'll take a few tins and strike over that way."

"Why can't the boys look after that—Andy and Horry, I mean?"

Gypsy shrugged. "Horry's busy at the hay-corral—if he's ever really busy at anything. And where is Andy?"

Her father scowled. "That's what I'd like to know. He's seldom at home long enough to say hello."

Gypsy stopped with her hand on the door-knob. A troubled look came into her face. "Oh, he's all right. Just likes to ride around, same as I do. There really isn't anything for him to do at home, and he likes riding."

"Then Spud should give him something to do. They're together enough to work out some regular

job for him. Anyway, I don't like you running around like this, with all these rustlers—and things. Let the punchers carry their own supplies."

Gypsy laughed merrily. "The rustlers? You think you know who they are—or who he is. Afraid he'll kidnap me?"

"I wouldn't put anything past that Cutten—or the 'breed, either."

"Real bad men, aren't they, dad? Well, I'll have to take the risk. I need the ride; I'm dying to feel the air slipping past my cheeks. And Fuzz needs exercise or he'll be getting beyond me."

"Just the same——"

"If it's Blue Pete you're afraid of—he's got a woman now he's too fond of to bother about anyone else. Besides, the Mounted Police are after him. He'll keep out of sight. . . . If it's Lee Cutten—— By the way, dad, what's the use of keeping yourself all het up about either of them? There's nothing you can do. They're here to stay, and they've broken no laws."

Anger flamed into Don Farren's face, and he crushed the paper in his hand.

"We're going to make it so da-arned unpleasant for them they'll be glad to get out. If they don't——"

"If they don't—what?"

"Then we'll put them somewhere where they won't trouble anyone." His lips snapped together, and he glanced at her guiltily. "Never you mind what we're going to do. You shouldn't ride about alone so much. Suppose your horse threw you and you were injured. You might lie a million places for a year before you were found."

Gypsy made a wry face. "Would you recognize my bones, dad?"

He waved her away, half amused, half angry. "Oh, go along with you. You always did manage to have your own way."

"It's good for your soul to be resisted," laughed Gypsy, and with another kiss flung from the tips of the gloved fingers she left the house.

He watched her through the window walk with her firm, springy step towards the stable. At the stable door she stopped, flung a swift glance back at the ranch-house, and turned into the cook-house. In a few minutes she reappeared, carrying a canvas sack. From the stable she brought saddle and bridle, rounded the bunk-house to the corral, and presently came riding out across the prairie, cutting straight across towards the gate.

Farren's brow wrinkled as he watched her until she passed out of sight behind the ranch-house. When she was gone over the rise, he put on his big black Stetson and set off heavily towards the stable. His face was lined. At the stable door he hesitated, his eyes on the ground, then stepped firmly through the door. A canvas sack was propped against the wall inside. He touched it with his foot, and a rattle of filled tins came from it.

As he entered the cook-house, Ching, the cook, thrust his head through from the kitchen.

"'Morning, Ching. Miss Gypsy took some canned stuff with her. Did the chuck-wagon need it?"

"Miss Gypsy she say so," replied the Chinaman.

"Did any of the boys report it?"

"Miss Gipsy she say so," repeated Ching. "Cow-boys eat too muchee—bust some day."

Farren went frowning away to the bunk-house. Dusty was there alone, lounging luxuriously in a chair tilted back against the wall, an illustrated magazine in his hand. He looked up, startled.

"Aren't you day-herding to-day, Dusty?"

"No. Spud says one of us gotta stay about the place. Sort o' close-herdin' the stable." He tilted his head and leered.

Don Farren turned abruptly away. "Did you hear



that the chuck-wagon was running out of supplies? "

"No. Is it? But I don't see how——"

"I was just wondering," Farren broke in, and left the building.

Thoughtfully he strolled back to the ranch-house. He was uneasy and loath to admit it. Gypsy was so headstrong, and he had an idea there was a part of her life from which she deliberately excluded him. What that part was, he feared to investigate.

He picked up the paper and tried to settle back to reading. The old cricket team in which he had played as a young man was having an uphill fight of it. And the fact that the football team of his home town had, last winter, lost a place in the First Division was evidence that England was failing.

But, so far as he cared that morning, England could go to the damnation bow-wows.

Folding the paper mechanically and shoving it in the rack where Gypsy insisted it should be kept, he put on his sombrero, fastened a pair of expensive spurs to his riding-boots, and went for his horse. Somewhat to his surprise, as well as to his satisfaction, the broncho fought him at first; it afforded a chance to work off some of his bad temper and worry. And as he rode away towards the gate one hand fondled lovingly the gold-and-silver-decorated horn of his expensive saddle, the grandest in the West.

He had scarcely disappeared when Dusty, who had watched his every movement, ran from the bunk-house and up the nearest slope, to lie in the grass and watch him ride away towards the south-east.

In the meantime Gypsy had felt vast quantities of air slipping past her face. The moment she was out of sight of the ranch-house she had dug spurs into Fuzz and set off at full speed. The sunlight, the nip in the air, freedom—and what lay ahead—lent a new sparkle to her eyes and flushed her cheeks prettily. She

raised her chin and drew in long, deep breaths; presently she even commenced to sing.

But after a time, glancing at her watch, the song ended abruptly and she raised herself in her saddle to look about her. Dodging into a coulee, she followed it as it dropped lower and lower, its heart lined with the pebbly bed of a dried-up stream. A few stunted cottonwoods grew along the course. More than once Blue Pete had sought the same secluded spot.

As she rounded a curve, her face lit up, and the rosy flush in her cheeks deepened. For there in the shade of a tree, lying on his elbow, facing directly towards her, was Lee Cutten. At sight of her he rose and came eagerly to meet her. And his eyes, too, were bright, his tall, lean figure and sombre face alive with a new vitality and eagerness.

He caught her in his arms as she swung from the saddle.

"Oh, Lee, I was afraid I couldn't get here."

"But you did, Gypsy," he murmured, "and that's all that matters."

She clung to him for a moment, her face troubled.

"But I'm afraid it isn't all, Lee. I'm afraid father is getting suspicious. You can't believe the questions he asks, the way he talks about riding about alone."

"Questions?" he puzzled. "But he can't suspect."

"Perhaps not," she agreed doubtfully. "I think he'd take his rifle and make a beeline for the Cutten farm if he ever was sure. Just the same, when he starts to get curious I have to keep my wits about me."

"I hope you don't have to lie," he said soberly.

"I'd hate to think I made that necessary."

She caught his arm and hugged it. "I don't care—not a—not a damn, as father would say in his more natural moments. It's his fault, anyway. I'm not going to let him decide about you. I know what

he'd say if he ever thought he had to—but I'd rather not be around to hear it."

She looked up into his face, squeezing his arm convulsively, smiling—hoping to break the sombre look that had returned to his face.

"I don't see what the end is to be," he sighed.

They seated themselves in the grass.

"Don't let's think about it," she pleaded. Then, unable herself to exclude it from her mind, she said: "I suppose we couldn't expect anything else. It's going to mess up the ranching business—you farmers, I mean. And you must remember they've had things to themselves so long—prescriptive rights. But"—with a fling of her pretty golden head—"they'll have to get used to it, that's all."

It brought a tender smile to his face. "Little traitor," he murmured.

With a low laugh she cuddled against him, and his arm went slowly around her waist, as if something within him stiffened against a demonstration so discordant with his nature.

"So many things may happen before you have to make a choice, Gypsy. . . . And I, a lone farmer, must bear the brunt of them all. I've an upsetting idea, Gypsy, that there's trouble ahead, and I can't prepare for it, since I can't foresee how or where it will strike. They feel they must drive me out, by hook or crook, or the game's lost. . . . There's that barbed-wire fence; it's going to cost me hundreds. I can't rewind it as I received it, and the company offers so little in exchange for the plain wire I must substitute. Then the new wire must be extra heavy. It has to be to resist the weight of drifting cattle, since the barbs won't be there to hold them off."

"I hope you don't blame it all on dad, Lee. The ranchers are all the same."

"Not all of it," he agreed. "But he leads the opposition. What that will lead to if ever he dis-

covers about us, I can only imagine; and it isn't pleasant to imagine. I've an idea they're tampering with my man right now. For days he's been so hard to get along with."

He was silent for a time. Then, shifting uneasily and glancing down at her from the corner of his eye, he said:

"I'm worried, too, about Phœbe."

"Oh, surely not!" Gypsy held away from him to see his face, shocked and indignant. "Surely she won't turn against you, not your own sister, Lee!"

"Well . . . there's Andy."

"What has Andy to do with it?"

"I'm afraid she sees more of him than she should. He's always coming around. She—likes him." He leaned forward and plucked at the grass. "I wasn't going to speak of it, but——"

A gale of laughter interrupted him. He stared at her, surprised and hurt.

"I don't see——"

Gypsy rocked back and forward. "Oh, gee, Lee, don't you see? Isn't dad in for a shock if Andy and Phœbe are in love with each other, as well as us? Doesn't the little god play some funny tricks on people?"

He did not smile. "It's you who doesn't see, Gypsy. What good could ever come of it—of those two getting together, I mean? It's hard to say it, Gypsy, but Andy could bring nothing but pain to her. He isn't much good to anyone, is he?"

A tinge of colour showed in her cheeks, and she looked away along the dry bed of the stream.

"Andy's all right—just young yet," she murmured.

"You must know him, Gypsy," he replied unhappily. "He's your brother, and you love him. But you know his shiftless ways. Where are they leading him?"

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and her voice was broken as she spoke.

"I don't know, Lee, I don't know. Sometimes I fear he's got quite out of hand. But there's good in him, lots of it. I'm afraid we don't handle him rightly. He was always spoiled, and dad tried too late to be severe with him at inopportune moments. He's headstrong—like I am, I suppose. We're both too much like dad to get along smoothly with him. But Andy is lovable, and affectionate, and clever. If we could only get him settled down! . . . Sending him to college was a mistake."

She faced him, a shadow of fear in her eyes. "But, Lee, it can't make any difference between us, can it?"

Lee Cutten sighed. "Sometimes I'm frightened. I can't see daylight anywhere. The harder I fight for you, the more clearly I see what trouble there will be when I speak to your father. And, Gypsy, I'm going to speak to him, and soon. He can't——"

A tuneless whistle drifted to them from beyond a bend in the coulee. Startled, they leaped to their feet. Gypsy's cheeks paled, but she held herself erect, drawing close to Lee and taking firm hold of his hand. Lee Cutten slowly lifted his shoulders and thrust out his chin, responding to the clutch of her small hand. Standing side by side, they waited.

Around the bend rode Blue Pete.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A RESCUE AND AN ATTACK

THE half-breed drooped languidly over Whiskers's neck, one leg caught around the horn of his saddle. His body swayed lazily to every movement of the pinto. His eyes were fixed on a corncob pipe, the bowl of which he packed with tobacco.

A great sigh of relief broke from Gypsy Farren's lips, and her face lit up.

"Hello, Pete!"

Blue Pete started and reined up.

"Oh, h'lo, miss."

He ambled Whiskers nearer, still intent on his pipe. He had not so much as glanced at Lee.

"Mebbe 'tain't news, miss, but yer dad's jes' up thar, makin' this way. Don' look none too sweet-tempered neither."

Gypsy's face went pale again, and she looked wildly about. Lee Cutten laid a hand on her shoulder and held himself straight.

"He must know some time, Gypsy," he said.

Blue Pete nodded. "Shure, shure. But this don' look like th' time. Sort o' like a rustler ketched 'th th' goods on him, ain't it?"

"But what can we do, Pete?" sobbed Gypsy.

"How can we escape?"

The half-breed thrust the pipe in the band of his chaps and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Wal, ef I was you I'd vamoose back thar whar I come from, and keep goin'. Jes' foller th' stream."

"But he's sure to see us that way," objected Lee, "and it'll be all the worse if we seem to be running away."

"He won't see yuh," Blue Pete assured him.

"But if he's comin' this way——"

"Shure. But I'm goin' thet way." He pointed in the direction from which Don Farren was approaching. "I got purtiklur business 'th yer dad, Miss Gypsy. Bes' git goin'."

He struck his knees into Whiskers's sides and rode up to the level of the prairie. His pipe was in his hand, and his head was bent over it, pushing tobacco into the already crowded bowl. He hummed carelessly, like a cowpuncher with no place to go and in no hurry to get there. The metal studs in his gun-belt shone brightly against the dark, soiled leather of his chaps. His flaming checked shirt was more untidily open than ever, and the open vest drooped limply over his hips. Even the kerchief about his neck appeared limper and more negligently knotted than usual.

Don Farren saw him the moment he appeared on the higher level, and he pulled his mount to a halt and waited. A cynical, triumphant smile settled on his face.

Blue Pete rode on, drawing nearer and nearer, his eyes still bent on his pipe. Only a few yards separated them when Farren spoke.

"Hello, Pete!"

The half-breed started so violently that Whiskers jumped. Don Farren spurred his horse forward.

"Where have you been hiding yourself, Pete?"

The half-breed grinned in a sickly way, and his crooked eyes darted nervously about as if contemplating flight. "Jes' ridin'."

"Just riding to avoid the Mounted Police, isn't it? Well, they want you."

Blue Pete drew a hand across his lips and smiled wanly. "Wot they want muh fer?"

"You'll have to ask them. They're after you, and everyone has orders to bring you in. They've been searching for you for a couple of weeks."

"Dang' poor searchers," ejaculated Blue Pete, contemptuously. "Shudn' otta le'e it tuh a rancher tuh corner muh like this."

Don Farren smiled. "Well, that's what's happened. Come along."

"But I ain' done nothin'," protested the half-breed.

"All right. You can tell that to the police. If it's so, you can't have any objections to coming along with me. We'll ride along to Turner's Crossing now. Go on."

He ranged up slightly behind the pinto and pointed to the north.

"Shure, shure, ef it means an'thin' tuh you, Mister Farren. I ain' got nothin' else tuh do. But yuh bes' ride up here 'side Whiskers 'n' me. We're both durn' skittish w'en we're sort o' chased, ain' we, ole gal?"

Everything was running so smoothly, and with a look of triumph Don Farren ranged alongside.

"Yuh see," Blue Pete elaborated, "Whiskers, she's narvous. Sort o' got used tuh cuttin' loose w'en she's chased. Never know w'en she might bolt. I got her trained tuh it. I had to—oncet."

Don Farren was content to let him talk. He'd have a story to tell his friends when they met next—how he had shown up the Mounted Police and brought the half-breed in himself.

They rode in silence for a time. Blue Pete looked more depressed as the minutes passed.

"Wonder wot they want muh fer," he puzzled. "Mebbe I know."

"Oh?" Don Farren had no intention of discussing it. "Perhaps it's just that they have to keep in touch with us all."

"Shure. Don' do tuh let a felluh wot used tuh



rustle git outa thar sight . . . not 'th all this rustlin' goin' on."

They had reached the trail, each horse dropping automatically into a rut and moving along at a gentle trot side by side.

"Mounties payin' yuh fer this?" enquired Blue Pete suddenly.

Don Farren laughed. "I'm not taking money like that. I never heard they were offering anything, anyway."

Blue Pete nodded again and again. "'Nuff fer yuh jes' tuh git muh took, ain't it? Git th' laugh on th' Mounties, an' on me, eh? Good story nex' time yuh meet yer frien's in th' Alberta. Somethin' tuh drink tuh. Wal"—he reached down suddenly, caught Don Farren's leg in one hand, and with a heave sent him flying from the ornate saddle to the soft grass beside the trail—"yuh ain' goin' tuh hev no story yuh'll gas much 'bout. Mebbe I'll tell it muhself, Mister Farren."

Whiskers wheeled in her tracks and was off at a tearing pace, lying low to the ground.

"Yip-ee!" yelled Blue Pete, as he looked back over his shoulder at the shocked, surprised, indignant, furious face of the biggest rancher in the district, sprawled on the grass, staring helpless after him, while his horse ran wildly about.

Blue Pete turned away. His head shook dismally. "Jes' th' same ole dang' fule, me." He looked off towards the coulee where he had left Gypsy and Lee Cutten. "Hope they done wot I told 'em, them two. Th' on'y way I seen tuh git 'em out of it 'thout shootin'."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### A SECOND MEETING

**B**UT if Don Farren was upset by the sudden turn in events, just when he felt so swollen with pride, he would have been further worried had he been with Blue Pete a few hours later.

The latter, after his rude treatment of the rancher, scurried away southward. He knew his victim had not been hurt, and his horse, the reins hanging loose, would not be able to run far. The rest of the day the half-breed spent in a coulee not far from one of the Inverted T herds. Only a couple of cowboys were on guard, but about the chuck-wagon, stationed beside a small stream not far away, several cowboys were saddling up. Blue Pete hoped Spud Taylor was among them.

He was surprised when, chancing to look back towards the Inverted T, he saw Spud coming towards the herd. Then Spud must have ridden in during the day, for he had seen him early in the morning at the chuck-wagon. The thought that he might have missed the foreman and wasted the whole day and night alarmed him not a little.

Spud made for the chuck-wagon, and as the sun sank, with five companions he set out to relieve the night-herders. The size of the group puzzled Blue Pete, until, by hovering about and watching every move, he discovered that Spud's work for the night was to be supervisory only. What, then, did he fear?

The punchers immediately commenced to close-

herd the cattle. They were taking no chances with the rustlers in the darkness. Daylight rustling was almost unknown, the one recent instance a reckless round-up by a gang of Montana outlaws who had previously cut the telephone wire not far from the Mounted Police hut at Eagle Butte. A fast rider had carried the news to Sergeant Mahon, who had set out immediately for the Cypress Hills to intercept the stolen cattle. It happened that Blue Pete, riding about, saw the excitement and overtook the Sergeant. After that it was not difficult to trail the herd and overtake them. After a running gun-fight, in which two rustlers were wounded and captured, the cattle were driven back to the prairie. At that point Blue Pete disappeared; except by the Mounted Police and the rustlers, he was not known to have played a part.

So long as he could in the growing darkness the half-breed kept track of Spud. For some time the foreman followed a reasonable schedule about the herd, then he vanished. An hour passed. Excited and anxious, Blue Pete set out on foot to circle the cattle now settling down for the night. The other five cowboys he accounted for, but Spud was nowhere to be seen.

Troubled, convinced that the foreman had given him the slip, he returned to Whiskers and rode thoughtfully away towards the Hills. He had a momentary thought of turning aside to make sure that Mira was at the 3-Bar-Y, but he fought it down and continued his way.

As he entered the Hills he was conscious of an unaccustomed fatigue. It was, he recognized, not so much physical as mental. Something about Spud's disappearance in the darkness of the night weighed on him. That he had gone without warning his companions he judged from the remarks he had heard as the cowboys met in their rounds. It even

added to his worries that he saw in it anything to worry about. There had been other nights, many of them, when he had not so much as thought of the foreman, but now even the Indians faded from his mind.

He rode slowly now, reasoning with himself. After all, Spud was only the starting-point of his troubles. Two weeks had passed, and he had accomplished nothing—two weeks of skipping about, without plan except to keep out of sight, two weeks of avoiding the Mounted Police, and Inspector Barker must be getting peevish. There would be much explaining to do when he returned. Something must be done, and done quickly, or he would never be able to return. And that meant—the old lawless life. He shuddered. But he was too tired to thresh it out now; in the morning, after a good night's rest.

He had advanced a mile into the Hills. Suddenly Whiskers pulled up. Her head was lifted, her body stiff. Blue Pete listened.

He heard it himself then—a sound he had never before heard in the Hills, a faint, high humming, now clear enough, now fading away. It was no animal he knew, and puzzled, he swung the pinto's head towards it.

He could hear it more plainly now. And a slow smile settled on his face. It was succeeded swiftly by a frown, and he pushed his sombrero back and scratched thoughtfully at the mop of stiff, black hair.

"Gor-swizzle!" he grunted.

Dismounting, he left the reins trailing and crept away.

"An'," he threatened as he went, "ef yuh's much as twiddle yer tail, ole gal, I'll jes' nachully sen' yuh back tuh th' ranch."

He faded into the darkness.

"Wot th' blazes? Wot th' blazes?" It kept tumbling over and over in his mind as he advanced. "Wot th' blazes?"

From somewhere before him came a man's harsh voice, and the other sound ceased instantly. Blue Pete stood fumbling at his chin.

"Wal, ef thet wudn' knock yer eye out!"

His eyes blazing, excited, all his fatigue forgotten, he crawled carefully forward. He reached the edge of a wide, bare hollow and looked down on a surprising scene.

In the heart of the hollow a fire burned. About it sat the four Indians who had made life so interesting during the past few days. And with them were Spud Taylor and Andy Farren. Across the young man's stomach as he rested on his back lay his guitar. His hands were locked beneath his head.

Spud was talking fast, gesticulating, driving something home to the Indians. Andy, away to one side, appeared not even to listen. The firelight slanting on his face made him look so young and innocent.

They were too distant for Blue Pete to hear what was said, but the Indians listened solemnly, Grey Coyote turning now and then to converse with his companions in their own language. Once Spud turned to speak to Andy, who shrugged and made no reply.

Presently Spud took something from his pocket and handed it to Grey Coyote, who thrust it into his antelope-skin chaps. Then they all rose, and Spud kicked the fire out.

In the darkness that followed Blue Pete had to trust to his ears. The Indians set off toward the south. For a moment or two he had it in mind to follow, for they were evidently under Spud's orders. But something decided him to wait where he was for a time. And after a few moments he heard Spud and Andy riding towards him. They were talking—or Spud was. The half-breed listened eagerly.

"Not likely," said Spud, with a laugh, evidently in answer to something Andy had said. "Oh, he'll get away. That's all we want. But he's got to

clear out and stay out. The boss'll have the Mounties after him hotter than ever now."

Andy laughed aloud, explosively. "Lord, how the dad must love that half-breed now! I'd give my left arm to have seen him flying through the air. You're sure he really piled him? I can see it. Oh, Lord!"

Spud, too, laughed, but not with amusement. "Sure thing he piled him. Yu can't imagine yer dad sayin' so if it wasn't so. He's fightin' mad. So mad he couldn't do nothin' at first but sputter. He had a devil of a time catchin' Tanglefoot, too. I just happened to ride in as he come in."

"What did Gypsy say?"

"She's just got back from a ride. The boss had gone after her when he met the 'breed. She laughed fit to split—and he couldn't cuss her, so he got at me and done a mile or two of it. Musta got rid of a lot o' bile before he was through. Trouble was he couldn't spank Gypsy, an' the madder he got the more she laughed."

Andy, too, laughed long and loud. So loud that Spud hushed him up.

"Never know where that damned 'breed is by this time."

The 'breed was following them on foot, for they could not go fast through the trees. When Spud spoke again his tone had altered.

"Now then," he said decisively, "here's what we got to do to-morrow night. I'll be——"

Blue Pete stopped and placed his hands over his ears. Then he crept away.

"Ef I listened I'd be off on suthin' else agin, like I allus go. I gotta keep straight on now an' git finished. I ain' got time fer nothin' else."

And then—he remembered where he had left Whiskers. If Spud and Andy kept on the way they were going they could not miss the pinto. In a moment or two. . . .

The moment or two passed. Spud uttered an exclamation.

"Well, I'll be damned! It's the 'breed's pinto!"

The two riders whispered together. Blue Pete cut across to one side. And from a distance, far from the direction where the meeting with the Indians had taken place, he thrust two fingers between his lips and whistled shrilly.

It was the call Whiskers never disobeyed. But she did not come to it now. Blue Pete heard her plunge and whinny protestingly, and he hurried noisily towards her.

"Wot th' blazes, ole gal?" he grumbled, stumbling forward. "W'y don't yuh— Oh-h!"

The exclamation, alarm and surprise mingled judiciously, burst from his lips as Spud reined in beside him. Daylight was beginning to break, though it was still too dark to distinguish more than outline in the Hills.

"So this is where yer keepin' yerself, Pete," jeered the foreman.

The half-breed made a movement as if to slink away. Then, as if realizing the futility of it, and how helpless he would be without Whiskers, he stood his ground.

"Shure. I like th' Hills."

"An' yu know the Mounties don't, eh?"

"'Tain't nothin' tuh me. Wot they gotta do 'th me?" he demanded sullenly.

"Better ask them."

"I ain't astin' nobody. Must hev a reward out, the way yuh seem so intrusted. But I ain' ketched yit, Spud."

As they parleyed Spud had been doing some thinking. He had his own presence there to account for, and that came first.

"I ain't thinkin' o' doin' any catchin'. But maybe yu can tell me if any Inverted T strays come in this way."

Blue Pete laughed. "Sarchin' fer strays in th' dark, eh, Spud?"

Spud did not answer for several moments. "It's in the dark the rustlers get their work in."

Blue Pete's laugh was more insulting. "So yuh thought yuh'd git th' drop on 'em in here whar' they know more hidin'-places 'n' you'll ever need, an' then you'd run 'em in tuh th' Hat? Didn' think yuh'd got so much guts, Spud."

"Lots o' things yu don't think, Pete," retorted the cowboy, losing his temper. "I'll take a chance on gettin' the drop on a rustler any time, anywhere."

The veiled threat did not escape the half-breed. But Spud did not know how well he could see in the dark.

"Wal, yer takin' a durn lot o' chance holdin' Whiskers like yuh done."

He strode towards the pinto. Spud reined back involuntarily before him.

"Best stay where yu are, Pete," he snarled. "I got the drop on yu—an' I wouldn't mind lettin' yu have it."

Blue Pete laid a hand on Whiskers's flank. He laughed.

"Yah, I seen the gun. Durn cocky times like this, ain't yuh. All right. Fire ahead. Mebbe yuh think th' Mounties 'ud stan' fer it. Mebbe yuh think they wudn' know. Mira!" he called. "Jes' hang 'bout an' watch. Ef he lets go, beat him to it."

Turning his back, he mounted the pinto.

It was Spud's turn to jeer. "That's an old one. I seen Mira ridin' to-day. Just stay where yu are, or——"

Andy rode out from the gloom where he had thought himself invisible.

"He doesn't need Mira," he said. "You're not shooting anyone, Spud. Put that gun away."

Spud swore viciously. For a moment or two it



looked as if Andy had only increased the half-breed's peril. But in the moment that the foreman's attention was distracted Blue Pete got into action. He reached out and caught the hand that held the gun, and with a wrench sent Spud tumbling from the saddle.

The cowboy's horse reared and plunged away.

"Now yuh know how yer boss felt," laughed Blue Pete, and started away after the flying broncho.

In a very short time he overtook it. He tied it to a tree. He laughed. He called out:

"Jes' a li'l stroll, Spud. Here's yer cayuse. I don' aim tuh do nothin' tuh keep yuh in th' Hills. Sort o' decent place, this, even 'th the rustlers. Some day mebbe yuh'll larn not to take on more'n yuh kin ride herd on."

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE INSPECTOR SPEAKS OUT

**R**OUND and round the office Inspector Barker ploughed, his cold pipe clenched in one hand, raising it now and then absent-mindedly to his lips for a "dry" puff. Against the window hummed a half-dozen large flies. The shaky swivel chair lay on its side, where he had knocked it as he rose.

Sergeant Mahon, in town garb of flaming scarlet tunic and navy blue breeches with yellow braid down the outer seams, watched his superior nervously, fumbling at his pinched-in hat.

The Inspector pulled up before him and waved a finger in his face.

"He's a damned sight more trouble to us, Mahon, than all the rustlers that ever lived, and you know it. You know it, damn him!" he almost shouted.

"More trouble, sir," put in the Sergeant mildly, "than all the rustlers we've had to deal with since we had Blue Pete to round them up for us."

The Inspector grunted angrily, angrier that he could not dispute it.

"And now when we catch up to him what's going to happen? I'll tell you: the whole dirty mess will come out—or it'll look dirty to the public . . . and to Regina, I'm afraid—how we've been using him all the time—using a confirmed rustler and law-breaker to help us out in enforcing the law. Everybody'll laugh at us . . . and there'll be the deuce to pay from headquarters."

"I don't believe you need fear that, sir," demurred the Sergeant.

"How can it help but come out?"

"Blue Pete will never tell. He'll take his chance without that; he never counted on us to get him out of a scrape. He doesn't know what it is to ask protection—from anyone, for anything."

The Inspector gave another angry grunt. "Hell, Mahon, you always did back him up. Can't you see what's happened this time? He's gone native again—back to his rustling, I mean. You and I have always said: 'Once a rustler, always a rustler'."

He stamped away to forestall argument; he had no wish to hear a word in the half-breed's defence.

"What a sucker he made of me! Here I send him out to catch those rustlers—and none too soon, with Farren spouting all over the place. And now I'm surer than ever I was fool enough to expect him to catch himself." He threw his hands in the air and made a sound like a dog worrying a bone.

"I still think you're wrong, sir," protested Mahon weakly. "I certainly hope you are."

"Damn it, what good are hopes? Do be reasonable. How else can you explain any part of it? The whole countryside is laughing at us for failing to run him down. More than two weeks, and he's still at large!"

He frowned at the floor.

"I wonder if he didn't suspect I knew more than I did. Perhaps he thought I was just leading him on. He's been so accustomed to succeed in whatever he undertook . . . and this time he couldn't without running himself in."

The Sergeant sighed. "We've looked everywhere, asked everyone. The only place we haven't combed is the Hills."

"I suppose—I suppose——" A sheepish grin overspread the Inspector's face. "You'll have to

know, I suppose. I've put the Indians on his trail—Grey Coyote and some of his friends."

The Sergeant's face showed genuine consternation. "Isn't that risky, sir? You know how they hate him—and I don't think he's overfond of them. And they haven't a scruple about doing any dirty thing they can get away with. They're sure to try it, and what will Blue Pete do? In the Hills anything might happen."

"And don't I know it—now?" groaned the Inspector. "That's the worst of it—what will Blue Pete do if they get dirty? Of course, I warned them against violence—if a warning's any good. But I hadn't a chance to warn Blue Pete that they might bark, but they aren't to bite. If they crowd him! Damn it, I feel like a silly infant. . . . That 'breed makes me feel that way so often I could bite myself."

"Oh, I know it was a crazy thing to do, but what else was there in sight? You and Simmons haven't done a damned thing; and that foolish trip of mine into the Hills warned me that only those who know that maze can hope to come up with Blue Pete. The Indians are at home there. I suppose I counted too much on them having a grain of common sense, when we know the only sense the Indians have is rammed into them by the law. . . . And the law hasn't rammed much at Blue Pete since we met him—not effectively, I mean. He never had the sort of sense that would keep him from getting us into trouble."

Sergeant Mahon enquired where Grey Coyote and his companions were now.

"How the hell do I know! I suppose they're on the job. That's why I brought you in: I want you to hunt them out and see what's going on." He tossed his hands into the air. "That half-breed will drive me crazy if—— Hel-lo!"

He had turned about in his pacing to face the window. With a couple of swift strides he reached

the desk and leaned his hands on the blotter, his face close to the glass.

"Oh, hell! There it is! I'm in for it again. Here comes that master of trouble-makers, Don Farren."

Sergeant Mahon started to rise. "Shall I go, sir?"

"You sit right there," ordered the Inspector. "I'm in just the proper mood to bite anyone's head off—and I can't imagine a more luscious bite than Don Farren's, even if it does leave a bad taste in my mouth. We're in for it."

He righted the chair and sat down. The pair waited. In a few moments the outer door opened, a few words were heard in the hall, and the rancher was announced.

He did not wait to be invited, but stamped into the room. Always on his visit to the barracks he resembled a particularly threatening thundercloud, but this time he was a full-fledged storm as he limped to the centre of the room and stood, his heavy brows almost meeting across his nose, and the quirt he carried slapping viciously against his riding-boots. Legs wide, head thrust forward, lips out, he glared at the Inspector. The lump in his throat rose and fell, as if words would not come.

Inspector Barker whistled under his breath. "Sergeant," he whispered, "did we take out that hail insurance?"

Don Farren's lips tightened, and his face went darker. He strode to a chair and crashed into it. But the movement brought a twinge to his face, and he swore under his breath.

"This is no time to be funny," he stormed. "But that's always the way with the Mounted Police, to cover their incompetence."

The Inspector noticed that his pipe was empty and proceeded to fill it.

"Any new instance you've thought of, Farren?" he asked, swinging precariously about on the treacherous

chair. "No objection to the Sergeant making a record of them, have you." He pointed to Mahon, who, by his manner, proved that he hoped the objection would be swift and final.

"Not a damn' bit. I want him to hear. I'd like every damned Mountie in the country, from here to Jericho, to hear."

"Jericho?" puzzled the Inspector. "Never heard of the place. What district is it in?"

Farren gulped a couple of times before he was in a condition to continue.

"I'm damned glad Sergeant Mahon is here. It's right in his territory."

"The Inverted T, you mean? I'd better get Simmons——"

"Nothing to do with the Inverted T. It's that God-damned 'breed!" It shot from him like a jet of steam.

The two policemen sat up. But if the Inspector's shoulders rose, his heart sank in his boots. He tried, however, to cover it with a low laugh.

"Do you mean you're off that poor farmer out there at last? Lee Cutten would be glad——"

"I'm off no one—no one!" stormed Farren.

"No . . . no, I might have known that," murmured the Inspector.

Don Farren was almost beside himself with rage. "Cutten's time's coming," he fumed. "Now it's Blue Pete—damn him!"

"You knew, of course, that we've been looking for him?"

"Who doesn't! And who doesn't know you've bullied the thing up, like you always do?"

"He's a slippery fellow," said the Inspector mildly.

"He's too damned slippery for the Mounties, you mean. You haven't even caught a glimpse of him." He leaned forward and struck the desk with his fist. "Well, I have."

"You don't appear to have enjoyed it," said the Inspector. "But I suppose you have him with you somewhere?"

"Have him—with me?" Words failed him for a few moments. "Have him—that scoundrel? God damn him, will anyone ever have him?"

"I'm hoping we might. We usually get them—in the end. You may have heard."

Farren eased his injured leg and winced with the movement. "I wish to hell the end had been yesterday morning."

"I wish it had been two weeks ago, but wishes don't— But that doesn't matter. Let's have the story. But before you begin"—the Inspector edged forward in his chair, a finger pointing straight in the rancher's face, close to his nose—"bear in mind that we don't care a tinker's cuss for your personal feelings for Blue Pete or anyone else. Now get started."

Farren's lips fell slowly apart, and his eyes opened incredulously. Never in all his life before had anyone spoken like that to him. On the prairie he had become something of a power, a leader among the cowmen, and even in town he carried things off with a high hand and got away with it.

"You mean—you mean——" he stuttered.

"I mean I'm running this division of the Mounted Police. I'm enforcing the law on the ranges, and I think I know my duty and do it as I think best. It's even part of that duty—as I see it—to ignore prejudice. I'm carrying that thought through so unqualifiedly that I'm not in the slightest degree interested in anything but facts. If you're prepared to unload yourself of a pressure of personal spleen, go elsewhere with it before you start. If it's just your bad temper, start moving—that way," pointing through the window, "before I let loose and spill some temper of my own. There's no one here to stop *me*. I'm stopping you, Don Farren."

Sergeant Mahon's eyes were round as saucers. Inspector Barker had warned him that he was in the mood to bite Farren's head off, but he had never pictured anything like this. The Mounted Police were trained to stand a lot, not because they feared to speak, but because they had no need to. So far as human beings could, they ignored personal likes and dislikes. But now and then their patience was exhausted—usually with benefit to everyone concerned. For a long time something like this had been coming to Farren, and the Sergeant felt like cheering.

Farren himself was shocked to silence, his eyebrows rising and falling, his lips parted. The Inspector appeared to feel the better for striking out, for his voice was mild and unmoved when he broke the silence that ensued after his outburst.

"All right, Farren. I'm listening."

Farren, staggered and shocked as he was, was not the man to be easily cowed. His lip curled.

"Well, since you've got that off your chest, Inspector, perhaps you'll listen to me. If the Mounted Police paid more attention to——"

Inspector Barker stormed to his feet, his face red with an overpowering anger. He leaned forward and shook his fist in the rancher's face.

"Look here, Farren, that's all along that line I'll listen to. Another word and I'll call the orderly and have you thrown out. Or if you prefer, I'll throw you out myself. But I wouldn't advise that. I—don't—care—a damn what you think of the Mounted Police. Now, are you going to give me the facts, and only the facts, or are you going to go out that door and never enter it again? I'm sick of your tantrums; I'll have no more of them. Quick—make your decision—or out you go. And it's a damned shame that I should have to talk like this to a rancher of your standing and intelligence. We're here to enforce the law, but you don't decide how we enforce it. And, I ask you,



how can we enforce it properly if we don't have the support of one of the most prominent ranchers in the district?"

He sat down. His anger had run itself out at the sound of its own violence, and the diplomatic conclusion was deliberate without being factitious.

Whether it was the threat or the compliment did it, Farren's manner changed. It was more likely the latter, for with all his temper he possessed more than his share of dignity, and the scene threatened to become rowdy.

"In enforcing the law," he declared with deliberation, "you can count on any rancher worth his salt."

"I hoped so," said the Inspector. "Please go on."

Farren told his story, his voice rising to a shout of outraged dignity when he came to that upset at the side of the trail. With a picturesqueness made more vivid by the very intensity of his fury he described his downfall—the complete somersault of his fall to the grass.

At the end Sergeant Mahon blew his nose violently. His eyes were wet with the effort to restrain the laughter that bubbled within him. He could picture those long legs sailing up in the air and over, and their possessor's choking rage and shocked dignity as he sprawled on the prairie and helplessly watched Blue Pete ride chuckling away.

The Inspector, too, had his moments of stifled amusement when he thought he would have to find some excuse for laughter, but he managed to hold his face straight.

"What do you wish me to do about it?" he enquired amiably at the end.

"Why—why—it's assault and battery—or something. Get him in here behind the bars, where he belongs."

The Inspector nodded thoughtfully. "I—see. I suppose . . . in a way . . . you're right—assault and

battery. . . . But a couple of problems present themselves. In the first place, are we certain a jury would consider it such a heinous offence. You see—I can imagine Paddy Nolan on a case like this—the defence would be that you had no right to try to force him to come with you."

"But—but you wanted him. I told him that, and he'd better come with me if he knew what was good for him."

The Inspector shook his head doubtfully. "A Mounted Policeman might put it that way. I'm not sure I wouldn't resist myself if someone without authority tried to bring me in as you tried with Blue Pete. But I'm not a lawyer; I don't know how the jury might look on it. But there's the other problem: The whole story would have to come out—and everyone who could get into the court-room would be there to hear. Quite a titbit for the gossips it would be—Don Farren flung from his horse, sprawling over the prairie, by the half-breed. Would Don Farren like to hear the laughs that would greet him as he went about? The public is silly about things like that, I know, but you're a big local man, and you know how they'd like a reason for laughing at you. Of course, mind you, when we get our hands on him we'll have something to say about this affair. But if you insist——"

He waited, eyeing the rancher with friendly concern. Farren rubbed at his hip.

"It's this damned kink in my hip," he muttered. "I'll have to make up some excuse for that."

Next day the Inspector, gazing idly through the murky window, jerked to his feet and, grabbing his cap, hurried out into the street.

It was the sight of Grey Coyote riding along South Railway Street that stirred him to action. At the end of the street before the Royal Hotel the Indian

turned and rode back. The Inspector trudged across the railway tracks and followed. The Indian saw him and made a motion with his hand and, digging his spurs into his pony, cut away to the east.

The Inspector returned to the barracks, mounted his horse, and rode towards the Indian encampment.

The four braves awaited him where he had come on them before. Grey Coyote greeted him with a sullen grunt. Without a word he pointed to the bandaged arm of one of his companions.

The Inspector sighed. "Blue Pete?"

Grey Coyote nodded. "Him shoot. Him shoot much. Indian no can shoot. Mounties no let um."

"Quite right, quite right. I can't authorize you to shoot anyone, except in self-defence."

"Always self-defence when Blue Pete about."

The Inspector studied the face of the wounded Indian. "He doesn't seem to be badly hurt. You can take it from me Blue Pete didn't shoot to kill. Tell me what happened."

Grey Coyote told a story, in short sentences, sometimes in little more than gestures. It discouraged any desire for details for which he was not prepared. He spoke slowly; and the Inspector was not deceived. There was more to tell, and Grey Coyote had no intention of telling it. He was convinced that Blue Pete had shot only in self-defence, a disabling shot, or there would have been a dead, not just a wounded, Indian to record it. The deduction was not difficult: the Indians had exceeded orders.

Following that thought came a stab of fear: Was Blue Pete dead? Had the Indians killed him, providing a case for themselves in the insignificant wound suffered by one of them—perhaps even self-inflicted for the purpose?

"Where is he now?" he asked.

"The Hills."

"What is he doing there?"

" We dunno. Blue Pete he always run."

" He doesn't seem to have run this time. All right. I won't need you any more."

Grey Coyote extended a brown hand, palm upwards.

" You pay us now? "

The Inspector laughed. " You didn't find him for me. I knew more about him than you've told me. You haven't found out what he's doing. I wanted that. But don't worry—you'll get part of what I promised . . . when I find you've done no more than I ordered. We'll wait till we hear from Blue Pete."

The Indians gabbled excitedly together.

" We take half now," Grey Coyote announced.

" No, we'll wait."

Again they talked.

" We take ten dolluh," said Grey Coyote gloomily.

The Inspector smiled. He knew that Blue Pete's side of the story would be worth hearing.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### BLUE PETE TO THE RESCUE

**S**USPICIOUS as he was of the Indian, aware of their penchant for double-dealing and forked tongues, the Inspector had no way of knowing what followed so closely on his departure.

He was scarcely out of sight when the four braves threw aside the phlegmatic manner they adopt before the whites, and especially before the Mounted Police. It was intended to convey the impression that they were too lazy to do anything wrong. Hurrying back to the camp, they despatched a runner to a look-out point towards the town to make sure the Inspector rode back to the barracks.

A crowd of squaws emerged from the tepees. Their arms were loaded with bundles of food and blankets—and rifles. Into a cleft in the cutbank they disappeared. They returned empty-handed.

The spy reported that the Inspector had gone on to the town, and three braves scurried to their ponies, mounted and rode up through the cuttings to the prairie level. After a careful scrutiny of the prairie they struck away to the south. Far before them rose the dark line of the Cypress Hills.

By only a couple of hours they missed another visitor. He came by the route they had taken in leaving the camp. Dismounting in a cutting, he advanced on foot.

He did not see a dusky face, a pair of crooked eyes,

that, just as he reached the camp, stared down at him from the level above.

"Gor-swizzle! It's shure gittin' all mixed up. . . . Spud Taylor an' th' Injuns—out thar in th' Hills, an' now here! Gittin' warm, boy, gittin' warm. Bes' keep yer eyes skinned fer trouble, Pete."

Spud's arrival at the camp was greeted by the hordes of dogs that, ill-treated as they are, and starved, always flock about an Indian camp, resenting the intrusion of a white. With his quirt Spud struck viciously into their barking and snarling faces, though they were too cowardly to touch him.

Not a soul was in sight, and Spud, puzzled, pulled up and scowled at the silent tepees.

"Hi!" he shouted. "Where's Grey Coyote?"

Life poured then from the tents, the bandaged Indian in the van. They swarmed about the cowboy, and he ordered them away with angry oaths. For several minutes he conversed with the Indian brave. He appeared disappointed and annoyed, but presently he returned to his horse, mounted, and rode back across the prairie, to enter the town from the south.

Blue Pete watched every move. He saw a brave come hurrying from a tent, leap on a pony, and ride furiously up towards Dunmore Junction, then strike away south towards the Cypress Hills.

Spud made his way straight down to the Royal Hotel. By good or ill fortune a number of riders from the Bar X and the Circle C were in town for a long-delayed carousal. Some of them were already within measurable distance of irresponsibility when Spud stalked into the bar-room.

Not a cowboy in the district was unaware of the treatment the foreman of the Inverted T had received a couple of weeks before at the hands of Blue Pete, and several of them had none too friendly feelings towards him. Friendly or not, this was the time to tease. So they greeted him with a jeering cheer.

It brought a flush of anger to Spud's face, and he pushed up to the bar and ordered a double whisky.

A puncher who found the bar necessary for his support, swung his head about and goggled at him.

"H'lo, Spud, ole sport! 'D they led yu oud th' 'ospital a'ready. Tha's wot comes uva goo' consi—consti—conshi—oh, hell, goo' 'ealth. The gread ou'doors"—he swept a limp hand about—"like yu read about." He raised an unsteady glass towards his lips. "Here's to yu, Spud, an' may yer hide be leather fur the nexd window-glass."

A short laugh through the room was followed by a watchful silence, as Spud leaned over the bar and swore.

"You go plump to hell, Bowery. Nobody never can send me to the hospital. An',"—turning slowly to take the crowd in—"no one never will. Anyone like to try?"

He had not touched the whisky. He stood with his back to the bar, his arms along it. The laugh had roused the devil in him. Something had to be done to clear up that disastrous affair with Blue Pete.

Reddy the bar-tender touched his shoulder from behind. "All right, Spud, all right. Nobody's goin' to try it in here. Put this inside yer vest." He pushed the glass over. "Then name yer poison. It's on the house. You didn't get back in time for the treat the house put up before." He coughed at the slip.

Spud gathered from the significant glances about him that everyone was laughing at him. He felt that, until he wiped the stain out, he could never hope to be one of the boys again. He swallowed hard.

"I'm payin' for what I drink, Reddy." He rolled around on one shoulder, picked up the glass, and downed it in a breath. The warming fluid thrilled through him, so that he felt heroic, capable of anything.

"And, Bowery," he hissed through his teeth, "in

case yu don't know, that damned 'breed got the drop on me before I could move. Ask Reddy here."

Bowery waved it aside as unimportant. "Par' th' game, ole boy, par' the game. Beat yu to it, eh?"

Spud wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Well, I'm not throwin' a gun careless in town. You boys know 'tain't wise. But that damned 'breed he don't know enough to be careful. He's just a coyote, a rotten coyote, in or out of town. But don't fool yerself, I'll get him yet. That happened to be his day; mine's comin'." He grinned with evil cunning.

Bowery nodded solemnly. "Grea' idee, Spud. Window don' hurt nobody; slug o' lead does. . . . There's some ud take a chance. Grea' idee yu didn't, ole boy. Damn' sighd safer, too."

His head drooped sleepily to the bar.

It rolled away and disappeared over the edge as Spud's fist landed full weight on the nearest ear, and Bowery dropped out of sight, knocking over a couple of heavy brass cuspidors as he fell.

They were all a little drunk, and instantly the fight was on. Since there were no outsiders, they had to fight among themselves, and they ranged up, Circle C against Bar X, the only division that offered. Spud was indiscriminate.

Reddy, helpless to interfere, realizing what these fights sometimes came to, telephoned for the town police. A single policeman came on the run. He piled in bravely—and merely increased the uproar. The fight continued, with sad effects on the equipment of the room.

The proprietor, a woman, heard the row. She heard the shattering of bottles as the contestants used them for weapons, and she ran to the street for help. The other town policeman, the chief, rushed past her to see what could be done.

But the local police had never made much impression



on the cowboys when roused, and Reddy knew it. He remembered that straight across the railway track Inspector Barker would probably be seated behind his desk, where he could see everything that went on along South Railway Street. Accordingly he leaped the bar and ran through the hall to the street. Placing two fingers between his lips, he whistled shrilly and waved his arms.

He could not see through the barracks window, but Inspector Barker heard the whistle. He was watching with considerable interest, anyway, for he had seen the two town policemen enter.

"Jenkinson!" he called. "Jenkinson!"

Corporal Jenkinson hurried in.

"I judge the Royal is putting up its usual entertainment. The town police are there, but Reddy appears interested in us. Better get across and look things over. Tell Langley to hold himself in readiness. If you're not back in three minutes I'll send him."

As a rule the very sight of the Mounted Police uniform stilled a disturbance, for it represented not an individual but an irresistible force. But the fight at the Royal had gone too far among drunken cowboys to follow the usual course. Jenkinson in a few minutes had lost most of his uniform.

The line-up had altered even before he appeared on the scene. The cowboys had turned in a body on the police. Jenkinson became only another intruder to add to the joy of combat.

When he did not appear in the three minutes the Inspector despatched Langley.

By the time he reached the hotel Jenkinson had given a good account of himself, with two cowboys out of the fight, and several rather badly marked. But he, too, was marked, bleeding at the nose, his lips swollen, his clothes almost torn from his back. The local police were fagged out. It looked bad for the two Mounties.

Suddenly the door at the back of the hall flew open and a wide-shouldered, dusky-faced man rushed in. Three cowboys had Jenkinson against the wall and were doing their best to put him out of the fight. The newcomer, with a bellow, rushed at them. Throwing an arm about the neck of the nearest, he sent him flying over his hip. His flying heels caught one of his friends and carried him crashing to the floor. Jenkinson knocked the third out.

For a second or two the violent entrance of a fresh antagonist stilled the fight, then, in a mass, the cowboys crowded together for a charge. At that moment Spud Taylor recognized the newcomer. He pointed,

"There he is! It's the 'breed, the damned 'breed! Get him! Get him!"

They saw no one else then. The four policemen were badly winded. Blue Pete backed slowly away. But a wide grin twisted his face, and his crooked eyes appeared to flash fire. Reaching down, never taking his eyes from the group creeping towards him, he seized a cuspidor. It was heavy, and it was full. With a heave he sent it into Spud's face, the filthy contents flooding over him and choking him.

"Corporal—Jenkinson," gasped the foreman, "there's your man—the 'breed—the horse-thief!"

The cry struck through the blind excitement that filled the room. Corporal Jenkinson turned slowly. He took a step towards Blue Pete, then appeared to stumble over the cuspidor.

Blue Pete turned and ran.

"Yip-eel!" he shrilled, as he dashed through the back door.

In ten seconds Whiskers was climbing Main Street at full speed—and there were no police to see.

Inspector Barker looked his two damaged men over. He listened to their story. At the end he coughed behind his hand, and his eyes twinkled.

" You stumbled over a spittoon, you say, Jenkinson. Hm-m! It would have been a dirty thing if you hadn't. Only don't, for Heaven's sake, say I said so." He sighed. " Will we never get out of debt to that damned half-breed! "

## CHAPTER XXIX

### AROUND THE INVERTED T

**B**LUE PETE had counted on the cowboy as he knew him. The unconventional introduction of the cuspidor and its filthy contents flooding Spud's face brought them to their senses—what senses liquor had left them. The accumulated spirits of weeks of monotonous riding, where they saw no strangers, knew no change, had exhausted themselves and they were satisfied. Black eyes, bloody noses, sprained muscles, bruises—it was little enough to pay for the fun they had had. They all felt better—and sheepish and apologetic to the Mounted Police.

The latter left further action to the town police and retired. And even the town police considered the fight preferable, in some ways, to having the street lights shot out and other civic destruction too often enjoyed by hilarious cowboys.

Nevertheless something had to be done about it: the law must be satisfied. And so the cowboys were marched in a body to the town hall, singing on the way and marching goose-step, and were crowded into a cell to await the convenience of a magistrate.

Most of them accepted it as part of the fun, a natural and not too heavy penalty. A five dollar fine—or, at the most, ten—and everything would be forgotten. They continued to sing behind the bars.

All except Spud. With the malodorous, disgusting contents of the cuspidor dried on him and causing an ostentatious cringing away from him every time a

cowboy looked at him, he went completely up in the air and expressed himself violently and luridly. Unfortunately, too, for him, audibly.

For it happened that the town clerk, on his way to the mayor's office, past the cell blocks—it was not the direct route, but it always soothed his rancorous soul to witness the downfall of iniquity—came within range of Spud's outraged feelings. Shocked, he hurried on and reported almost verbatim to the mayor. He had a fine memory for profanity, and an unctuous, sonorous voice for repeating it.

And the mayor, in recognition of the large church vote, promptly went into action.

The result was that, while Spud's companions were released on payment of small fines—they would spend in town what was left, anyway—Spud was held on a further charge of profanity and fined twenty dollars.

Since he had no such amount on him, he was given the alternative of ten days in jail. It knocked from him not only profanity but speech itself; all he could do was gulp helplessly and wonder what the world was coming to in the last few weeks.

Fortunately—a fact he had not known in his unpremeditated visit to town—Don Farren was still in Medicine Hat. The news of the fight spread quickly. It reached Farren's ears, and he set off for the Mounted Police barracks.

Inspector Barker received him with less cordiality than usual.

"Why come to me?" he enquired irritably, when he heard the story. "I've nothing to do with it. We merely assisted in enforcing order. At least, we did our best; it was Blue Pete put an end to the fight. Poor Spud!"

"And you let that damned 'breed get away again!" sputtered the irate rancher.

The Inspector's jaw set. "I'd have put Jenkinson

behind the bars for ten days if he'd nabbed Blue Pete then—after what he did."

"But now what am I to do about Spud?" wailed Farren. "He's in for ten days, and in these times I can't afford to run the herds a man short. It's a God-damned shame."

The Inspector raised a restraining hand. "Damn it, Farren, be more careful of your own language. Of course you can have Spud. All you have to do is to go up and pay the fine."

With a heavy scowl Farren strode to the city hall, every foot laid down with emphasis. The noise of his passage was so ominous that when he threw open the door of the city clerk's office that timid, sensitive individual cowered behind his desk.

Don Farren stalked to the desk and crashed a fist on it.

"Where's that foreman of mine, damn you?"

"He's—he's—— The Mayor will know."

"You know where he is, damn you. He's in jail. Take me to him."

The clerk clambered out from behind the desk and led the way to the corridor before the cells. Spud was seated despondently on his bunk, his head in his hands. Farren rattled the bars.

"What the —— —— blazes did you get yourself into this —— —— mess for, you —— ——? Hell of a damnation thing to go cussing the law when it's got you stooping, you —— ——."

The tirade continued for several minutes, almost hot enough to melt the iron bars. The town clerk listened contentedly. That was the stuff to give the blasphemer, a torrid lambasting in language he understood. About time these loose-mouthed cowpunchers were taught they couldn't cuss all over Medicine Hat and get away with it. Took a rancher to tame them down.

"What the hell you doing in town, anyway?" Farren demanded.

Spud stood humbly and took it all, head bent.

"I—I had to come. Somebody stole a couple ropes the other night. The boys had to have new ones."

Farren hauled a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off two tens.

"Here, damn you, Jimmy," he said to the clerk. "And if I ever catch you profaning the prairies with your God-damned psalms, I'll cook up some charge against you as silly as this and get this money back, if I have to ring your ——— neck."

It was several hours after Don Farren and Spud had left town before the town clerk ceased trembling. To his chagrin he discovered that his terror must have interfered with his memory, so that some of the choicest of Farren's blasphemy had evaded him. Nevertheless he hurried to the Mayor's office to repeat what he could remember; it was his one opportunity for eloquence.

But between Don Farren the rancher and Spud Taylor the cowboy lay a great, wide gulf. The cowboys had no votes in town, but most of the ranchers had homes there. Besides, the town was already in convulsions over the new crime that had been discovered.

Spud rode out behind the buckboard, taking its dust without a murmur. He would not have talked much anyway, for a new worry appeared to have settled over him. Now and then his eyes flew anxiously across the prairie towards the Cypress Hills, and his hand would tighten on the reins as if he longed to break wildly away.

Blue Pete had seen them go. And when they were far enough away he mounted the pinto and returned to Medicine Hat.

Entering from the side towards Dunmore Junction as darkness fell, he rode through the unlighted streets of the flats north of the town and carefully approached the barracks. The Inspector had gone home long

since. Only a dim light burned in the hall. Blue Pete crept to the door and slipped a piece of paper beneath it. Then he knocked sharply and hurried away.

A sleepy orderly on duty opened the door and found the note. It read:

"Leev me alone inspekur."

By the time Inspector Barker had the note read to him over the telephone Blue Pete was well on his way south.

It was far on in the night when he turned in along the trail that led to the Inverted T. Presently he dismounted and, striking a match, examined the dusty ruts. The marks of the buckboard were there, but, with an exclamation of concern, he failed to find any trace of Spud's broncho. He had made certain of identifying the marks left by the foreman's mount, so that the absence of them now upset him. But, after examining the main trail farther back, he discovered that Spud had cut across the prairie towards the ranch buildings.

Puzzled to understand his own concern, he followed. Above the ranch-house he dismounted and circled on foot around the valley. Above the bunk-house he climbed through the wire fence. He was desperately tired, for he had slept little of late, and the events of the day had worn on him. Irregular food, too, was exacting its toll at last. But, most of all, worry was responsible. So that he was not at his best as he crept through the grass towards the bunk-house.

As he neared it through the darkness, a tardy tingling in his veins pierced through his weariness and he lay down to listen.

Off to his left a faint rustling in the dead grass alarmed him by its nearness. He lay still, scarcely breathing. The sound passed on down the slope. He raised his head.

Someone chuckled not thirty feet away.



"Pretty smart, I guess, for Andy Farren," the young man whispered. "You look as big as a house against that sky, Pete. I'm coming up to you."

The half-breed's first impulse was to flee. He had little more desire to meet Andy than anyone else. The young man, however, presented no immediate threat, so he remained where he was, vastly puzzled by Andy's presence.

"I didn't expect you any more than you did me," laughed Andy, when they were together.

Blue Pete made an ambiguous sound. "Ef I didn' know, Andy, yuh ain' 's bad 's yuh sound, I'd say yuh wasn't up tuh no good—out sneakin' 'bout in th' dark."

"What about yourself, Pete?"

"Oh, me! I ain' never up tuh no good—they say."

"A word in your ear, Pete: Dad's carrying an arsenal about with him after that little affair of the upset; he'll shoot on sight."

Blue Pete laid a hand on his arm. "Don' yuh worry none 'bout me, boy. All you gotta do is not git yerself intuh no trouble. Ef anybody foun' yuh like this—the Mounties, say! Durn' curyus, them Mounties. Allus wantin' tuh know w'y. Allus pokin' 'bout—findin' spurs an' things."

Andy said nothing for a moment. Then he laughed recklessly.

"I'll have to take lessons at covering my trail, Pete. Want a pupil?"

"Andy, boy," said Blue Pete gravely. "Yuh gotta go through wot I bin through tuh larn thet—an' I hope yuh never git thet far off th' track."

"What are you going to say when the Mounties do get you, Pete?"

"Huh! I ain't never bothered tuh think. Ef I ken't answer wot they want tuh know, why, I'll jes' nachully vamoose—an' keep goin'."

"A rotten deal they're giving you," said Andy

impulsively. "And I'm afraid you're making it rougher for yourself."

"Thar's others tryin' it, Andy. Thet's wot's got muh down jes' now. But don't yuh worry, I'll come out right side up. Dang' fule, shore, I know it, but thet's the way I pull through sometimes. I ken' do it no other way."

"But I'm afraid you're up against it this time, Pete. Everyone's against you, and the Inspector had a flea in his ear, they say. Dad and Spud have been giving it to him about you."

"Spud wud," said Blue Pete grimly. "He called muh a hoss-thief, too. Did he tell th' Inspector thet?"

"I suppose he put in all the lurid details he could think of, and you know how he hates. You sec, Pete, this rustling has things stirred up, anyway."

"Do you think I'm a rustler?" asked the half-breed.

"How do I know?" Andy laughed a little excitedly.

"Boy, ef I wanted hosses I wudn' waste time on no cayuse like that white-socks thing o' Dusty's. W'en I rustled I done it big."

There was a note of suspicion in Andy's voice when he spoke again.

"Just what are you doing here, Pete?"

"Wal, it's durn' nice tuh be talkin' to someun after all th' time I bin hidin'."

"But you had no idea I was here. Look here, did you know? Have you been following me?"

"Ef I was, yuh wudn' never hev seen muh, Andy. W'en I git after yuh, look out. Bes' jes' stay right here at home. Then I won't hev no reason to foller yuh."

"Why—why, what do you mean?" demanded Andy angrily.

"Oh, nothin'. Jes' thet. An' Spud Taylor ain' th' kin' makes a good friend. He's dirty." Suddenly

he chuckled. "I bet he's bin dirtier sence I dumped thet spit over him in th' Royal—right in his face. I bet he ain't eatin' sweet sence, er smellin' neither."

"Good God!" Andy gave a hissing whistle. "Say, what happened? I haven't seen Spud——"

His whispered tones shut off abruptly as Blue Pete's hand clutched his arm.

"S-s-s!"

Andy listened for a moment, then with both hands he pushed the half-breed away.

"Get out, Pete. For God's sake get out of this."

"Wot 'bout you, boy?"

"Oh, I'm all right. It's Spud. He—we're——"

He stopped. Blue Pete did not wait for him to finish the sentence. He glided away, and in the darkness his head kept shaking gloomily.

## CHAPTER XXX

### CORNERED

HE did not linger. That would be dangerous. Andy's odd friendship with Spud Taylor was warning enough that he was not to be trusted. The young man would suspect that he might remain within hearing and would take the necessary precautions. Anyway, he played no part in what the half-breed had in mind, and the time was past when he could afford to let anything more intervene to distract him. There were things he had no desire to know as yet; and, above all, he dare not face Spud just then.

As he picked his way back to where he had left Whiskers, Andy and his inexplicable presence there lurking in the dark clung to his disturbed mind. But he fought it back impatiently, and, riding away, found a retired coulee and lay down to sleep. He would have given much to have been able to reach the Cypress Hills and one of the caves where he felt so safe, but the Western night was too short to ride so far.

All the next day he tried to rest, but he was impatient, distressed, ever struggling to see daylight through the fog of uncertainty and failure that had dogged him ever since he had crept away from returning the Police horse to Turner's Crossing. Not a glint of hope for success did he see. The whole fortnight had been wasted, leaving him, indeed, more in the dark than ever.

With darkness the next night he set out for the Hills. He had estimated time and speed to reach the Hills as the sun rose, for he was worried now about the Indians. He tried to convince himself that, for the first time, he would be safe in the Hills. He had seen the Indians set out for Medicine Hat, and he did not know what had happened since; and Spud was at the Inverted T. What was there to fear?

Yet he did not feel safe, and as he entered the Hills he found himself listening as he moved warily forward. But it was Whiskers gave the first warning of danger. She pulled up and stood with feet braced, nostrils distended with fear.

Instantly the half-breed crouched in the saddle, his crooked eyes piercing every cover. The pinto stared straight ahead, and with a twist of his wrist he turned her aside, never taking his eyes from the direction in which the broncho had been staring.

Finding a thicket of lodge-pine trees, he dismounted, concealed the pinto as best he could, and started back. He noticed then that the pinto's attention had been directed towards the cave where he planned to rest. Like a snake he crawled along, noiselessly, keeping his head low, trusting entirely to his ears.

Just in time he discovered what had alarmed the pinto.

Not forty yards ahead and slightly to the left a rustle of dead leaves brought him to a halt. Cautiously he commenced to draw back, his head slightly raised now, so that he could look ahead beneath his brows. Reaching cover, he looked about.

Out before him the dark face of an Indian was raised, the eyes wide and alarmed, suspicious. But it was turned slightly away, so that Blue Pete was certain his whereabouts had not yet been detected.

That there must be other Indians about he knew, for the one he saw was certain not to be alone. Besides,

he recognized the brave as one of the four who had dogged him through the Hills—and been dogged by him—only a few days ago.

Then they were after him again! But why had they gone to the Hat? And why had they returned so quickly? And how was it that he had missed them? . . . What was their connection with Spud Taylor?

It required no answer to any of the questions to impress on him the danger he was in. And the fact that they were there close to the cave he was making for, lying in wait for him, proved how serious they were.

Creeping away, he approached from another direction the ravine in which was the cave. Lying over it, he saw nothing suspicious at first. Then his attention fixed itself on a stone near the edge of the little stream that flowed before the cave. Something was different there. Yes, on its edge showed a dark patch of moisture. It had been shifted—tilted into the water by pressure and allowed to drop back.

It told the half-breed what he wished to know, and he returned to Whiskers and led her away. There was the other cave, the one he had deserted a few days before because Mira had waited for him there. Instinctively he had avoided it this time, too.

In half an hour he reached a point from which he could examine the entrance from a safe distance. Not a sign could he see that it had been visited, and he went inside with a sigh of relief. Everything there was as it should be, and he unsaddled Whiskers and lay down to rest.

In spite of the long but troubled rest of the previous day he slept heavily, without dreaming, so dead to the world that his usual protective instincts slept with him.

He was wakened by a tugging at his shoulder, and he felt himself being dragged across the rocky floor. The movement was too gentle to alarm him at first in the deep stupor of his sleep. But at the cold touch

of Whiskers's nose against his cheek he sat up. And instantly he knew there was danger somewhere near.

He was wide awake on the instant. It was Whiskers who had dragged him. He found himself several feet from where he had lain down. They were both against a wall now, and the entrance, behind its cloaking vines, was not visible. It was still daylight, and sufficient light penetrated the cave to enable him to satisfy himself that they were alone.

He looked about for his rifle, but it lay, with saddle and bridle, where he had gone to sleep. He raised his eyes to the pinto's face, and the sight of her flaring nostrils and wide eyes, the lips drawn viciously back, sent a chill through him.

First he must get the rifle. But as he started to crawl to it, the pinto caught his loose vest in her teeth and held on. He did not resist; he trusted Whiskers's acute senses more even than his own.

His trust was justified when a rifle-shot rang out and a bullet snipped through the vines and chipped a splinter from the wall before his eyes.

The echoes had scarcely ceased when Blue Pete threw himself forward, grabbed the rifle, and returned to the cover of the curving wall. The rifle was the one he had taken from the Indians, had dropped, and that Mira had returned to him when she rescued him. He examined it anxiously. The magazine was almost full, sufficient, with any luck, to fight his way out. That is, if he might shoot to kill. But that method of escape was denied him. Strange how, in extremity, the rules of the Mounted Police game sometimes held his hand. The Indians, however, would have no compunctions.

His back against the wall, he waited, the rifle across his knees.

Something about the whole affair puzzled him. Were the Indians seriously attempting to do away with him? He could not believe it—though nothing

but fear of the law would prevent them. But if they wanted to kill him they would have lain in wait for him outside, to pick him off as he emerged. It would be simple enough, and without danger to themselves. But they had fired a shot into the cave! Surely they could not hope to get him that way, especially since the shot must have been fired blindly. What it did do was warn him of the danger outside.

And that, he figured, was exactly what they wished. He was intended to know of their presence out there. Why but that he would not risk going out?

A glow of excitement ran through him, and he leaned back against the wall with a smile, his eyes half closed.

His watch told him that in another hour the shades of evening would thicken in the forest outside. That would be the best time to escape; but he knew better than to trust entirely to the darkness. It would mean that the Indians would lie closer to the entrance of the cave, and could pick him off before he could hope to catch a glimpse of them. The advantage of darkness was entirely theirs.

But there was another way, based entirely on distracting their attention.

First of all he decided to explore the cave more thoroughly. He had never bothered to follow it to its end, and there might be another opening, though the absence of draughts argued against it. He might, however, discover some distant corner where he and Whiskers would be safer, might, if the worst came to the worst, make a stand.

Hugging the wall, he set off back into the deeper gloom of the cave. The exposed angles he hurried past, crouched low lest another bullet come singing in. The cave was deep and high, but it extended almost straight into the hill-side, and in a few minutes he reached the end. Back once more beside Whiskers, he set his mind to devising a plan of escape. The pinto nuzzled up against him, and he rubbed her ears.



"Jack rabbits—or gophers, ole gal, thet's wot we are. Druv tuh our hole . . . On'y we ain' got no other way tuh git outa."

But he was not depressed. Indeed, it was exactly the sort of strait in which he had always taken such delight, a dilemma that called for cunning and recklessness, the mixture he knew so well how to utilize.

Keeping his eyes on the fading daylight reflected on the opposite wall, he completed his plans. Whiskers, too, never once turned her back on the entrance, her ears pointing forward, hearing perhaps more than her master. . . . Gradually the wall blanked out. And suddenly night lay deep over the world within the Hills.

Saddle and bridle had been left across the cave, and he brought them to the pinto. Attached to the cantle were still the four torn fragments of blanket which had already served him so well. These he fastened over Whiskers's unshod hoofs, tying them so that they could be quickly released.

"Dang risky, ole gal," he whispered, "an' you got th' wust of it. But we ain' goin' tuh let nobody, let 'lone Injuns, hole us up like rabbits, you 'n' me ain't."

He led her towards the entrance, keeping close to the wall, taking care to make no sound. They moved like ghosts, the man and the broncho; the latter seemed even to hold her breath. Just within the screen of vines they halted, and Blue removed the pieces of blanket and tied them to the cantle.

"Yuh're in fer it, ole gal," he whispered. "Sorry, but yuh gotta take a chance, too. Mebbe they'll git one of us. Ef they do—wal, it's bin a merry life, eh? Good 'nuff way tuh kick out, this."

He stood considering. "But ef they git you 'n' not me, then thar's goin' to be a lot o' dead Injuns the country don't hev no use fer nohow."

Placing his rifle on the ground, the muzzle turned

back into the cave, he felt about for a rock. This he placed on the stock. To the trigger he tied a long, strong string, coiling the rest on the ground and keeping hold of the end. He raised the hammer.

Whiskers had not moved. From the stiffness of her neck and the slight trembling spasms that shook her, Blue Pete knew the Indians were not far away. With a sudden "Yip-ee!" and a stinging slap on her rump, he sent her flying through the vines. Linger only a fraction of a second to see which way Whiskers ran, he dashed in the other direction.

A shot had greeted Whiskers's rush, then another. They were aimed, Blue Pete knew, in the general direction of the pinto, not at him.

But his plan was still incomplete. Cowering against the cliff, ten yards from the entrance, the string in his hand, he waited to see what the Indians would do. He could hear nothing to indicate that they started off after Whiskers; but he was going to make sure of that.

The pounding hoofs faded into the distance. With a grin, Blue Pete gathered the slack of the string into his hand and gave it a sharp pull. The rifle he had left banged harmlessly into the silence.

Two bullets ripped through the vines in reply.

With a broad grin the half-breed crept away into the night.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### DEEDS OF DARKNESS

HE knew he had outwitted them, and only a dangerously tardy reflection forestalled the exultant "Yip-ee!" that announced his triumphs. He had no wish to undeceive the Indians. They thought he was still back there in the cave, and he wished them to go on thinking it. For there were, he had noticed each time, only two shots fired. Then where were the other Indians, for there were certain to be more than two?

So they had thought to keep him in the cave? Once more Blue Pete asked himself why. Was it that they wished to make certain he should not be at hand for something else that was to happen, something they dare not let him know about? They had returned to the Hills after a flying visit to the Hat, and that in itself meant that they had something in mind. Now he knew that it was something more than himself.

First he must find Whiskers. She would, he knew, keep on in the direction of the 3-Bar-Y, but how far she would go he could not guess, though he suspected that she would not go far without him. Swinging wide of the ravine, he circled around in the same direction. Now and then he paused to listen. The rifle-shots had temporarily silenced the night-life, so that the stillness was startling. The beating of his own heart was audible.

On and on he trudged, growing more anxious and

depressed. Had one of the bullets got the pinto, and was she lying somewhere, helpless, perhaps dying, longing for him—or dead? He had almost made up his mind to risk the signal she knew so well, when he remembered the Indians. Instead, he sent into the night the double hoot of the screech-owl that had served him and Mira so often. He had never used it with Whiskers, and he had not much hope.

The sound still echoed through the trees as from somewhere before him came a scurry through the dead leaves, and Whiskers trotted to him with a welcoming snort, nosing ecstatically against his shoulder.

In the stress of his emotions Blue Pete clung to her, his arms about her neck, his cheek against her nose.

"Gor-swizzle, ole gal," he murmured, "'nother minut an' I'd 'a' bin back thar shootin' them Injuns up."

He climbed into the saddle. With Whiskers picking their way, he was freer to watch and listen and plan.

For a long time he did not move. He was trying to make up his mind what to do. If his theory was right, it was wasted time to do nothing more than keep an eye on the guard before the cave. Whatever was to happen would not be there. And so, with nothing better in mind, he set off north-westward. In that direction lay the prairie, and the herds, and the ranches—the life of the ranges. From that direction came every visitor to the Hills.

Every visitor but the rustlers from the Montana Badlands.

With the thought he swung Whiskers about and rode south.

It was still some time to daylight when he knew he was near the southern edge of the Hills. Nothing as yet had occurred to arouse his suspicions or to give him the slightest clue to the scheme the Indians had in mind. With a distressing sense of helplessness

ness and defeat, he pulled up and sat frowning into the darkness.

This time his ears were quick as Whiskers's. From somewhere to the left and behind came the slow thud of approaching horses.

Estimating their direction, Blue Pete rode on to intercept them. Just within the last of the trees he dismounted and crept forward. He had not long to wait.

There were in the oncoming group, he figured, four or five horses. The smallness of the number puzzled him. They were not likely to be rustlers or they would not be making for Montana empty-handed. He recalled that the same mystery had puzzled him the week before, as he entered the Hills from the south.

Then one of the invisible riders spoke.

"Yu're sure he didn't get away?"

The sound of that voice sent a thrill through the half-breed. For it was Spud Taylor.

"No get away. Only cayuse." That from Grey Coyote. "No fool Indian. Blue Pete bronc go. Blue Pete shoot after. Sunface and Black Eagle keep him till sun come up. No find us then."

They came on—so close to where Blue Pete stood that one of the horses shied at the shadow; but it was too dark for the unsuspicious riders to see him. When they were gone he crept after them.

At the very edge of the prairie the cavalcade stopped.

"You got about three hours before daylight," Spud declared. "You can make the Border in that time, or pretty near it. There won't be nobody on the look out, anyways. Get things fixed up and come back. I don't care how much you make over there; I'll pay you what I promised when you get back. Now get goin'."

The rest of the group faded out over the prairie. Spud remained where he was for a time, listening to

the retreating horsemen. Then, with a harsh laugh, he turned and rode back into the Hills.

For a flaming moment Blue Pete considered facing him and having it out with him—having several things out with him. But he saw in time how little that would profit him. Spud would only laugh at him, defy him. After all, the mystery was wrapped up with the Indians, not with Spud.

Blue Pete waited till Spud was out of hearing. Then he found Whiskers, mounted, and set out towards the south.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### ON THE TRAIL

THE Indians rode fast, and it was some time before Blue Pete came close enough to satisfy himself that he was on the right trail. Making certain that they were heading south-east, he was content to drop behind in order that when daylight came he might not be discovered. He knew the Milk River ford, not far from the Boundary, towards which they were going. Across the river was another stretch of sixty miles of prairie, then they would reach the Badlands. There he would be able to follow them more closely.

By daylight they were out of sight. The iron post he passed, marking the Boundary Line between Canada and the United States, sent an odd thrill through him, reminding him of the old lawless days, of rustling packed with excitement, of a general laxity in law enforcement across the Line, partly because the sheriffs who policed the district were merely political appointees and unfitted for their duties, partly because they were—so many of them—open to bribery or easily frightened. The crust imposed by the new attitude of mind, the new line of conduct, in the foreign land, was still very thin.

He rode carelessly, with none of the caution, the tight nerves, of the land to the north where law enforcement was still strange and irritating to him. He felt so confident that he knew the route the Indians would follow that he awakened with a shock

to the fact that he had lost their trail. Riding about, he convinced himself that they must have turned aside to some other ford, and he began to realize that they were not going to be too easy to follow.

Breaking away to the east—since they would be forced sooner or later to work in that direction—he picked up their trail once more and thereafter clung to it. Not far below the Boundary they swung around the eastern edge of an Indian Reservation, and, by signs easily distinguishable, he read that they had increased their pace. He was, however, gaining on them, and for fear he might ride into them in the night, he lay down to rest.

Shortly after three in the morning, with the day breaking, he started on. The country was more thickly treed now, and presently the level commenced to break up for the roughness of the Badlands, so that he could not see far about him. An hour and a half after starting he came on the ashes of the night-fire the Indians had built. They had chosen a depression, where lush-grass grew beside a stream, with a thick growth of trees at their backs to protect them from the northern breeze.

By eight o'clock the Badlands swallowed him.

He knew this country even better than the prairie, and it gave him the advantage, for the Indians could not be so familiar with it. Most of his life he had spent here where the criminals of half a dozen states were wont to seek refuge. From ranchers to east and south he had rustled for years, and here in the Badlands were a hundred of the grandest feeding grounds, where no one would ever find the rustled herds, even if any one dared to follow.

The Badlands of Montana is a curious country. Perhaps the Cypress Hills, ninety to one hundred miles to the north, is the explanation. For the gougings, the chasms, that are the Badlands, torn from what was once prairie, must have been formed by



gargantuan hands that carried the excavations across the Border and dumped them on the Canadian prairie to form the Hills.

It is a dismal maze of canyons and chasms and ravines, of alkali streams and pools, of broken forest and lodge-pine, arid in summer, hideously frigid and snow-blocked in winter; a haunt of rattlesnake and wolf. And all below the level of the surrounding country. No peaks, no hills, only depths. But, dismaying and comfortless, and melancholy as it is, within it lie the sweetest of valleys, where cattle can graze even in winter.

Blue Pete hurried now. Somewhere within the Badlands he knew his search would end. His curiosity increased, and he drove Whiskers hard.

To his dismay and surprise he soon discovered that the task was to be more difficult than he had supposed. The Indians, whether to throw off pursuit, or made more cautious by the knavery they had in mind, frequently altered their course, sometimes choosing routes that left no trail. In keeping track of them they gained on him, and there were times when impatience almost drove him to forge ahead, taking his chance on overtaking them.

One thing held him stubbornly on their trail: within the Badlands they could not wander far. Once their course was chosen there, the difficulties of the way would keep them to a prescribed route except at long intervals.

Another surprise came with the discovery that the Indians knew the country well, were even familiar with the different routes, since every change of course avoided the innumerable culs-de-sac and blind ends that opened temptingly to the tenderfoot.

Now and then he came on recent tracks of cattle and horses, driven in herds, always working south, and the task the Inspector had asked him to undertake commenced to tug at him. But he fought it back

savagely. The Indians, and Spud Taylor's connection with them—that was all he should think of now. Even the quest he had set himself that day as he rode out from his first fight with Spud had for the time being dropped from his mind.

It was late afternoon. He had had nothing to eat since the day before. Four times since early morning he had halted, unsaddled Whiskers, and allowed her to graze. He knew how much depended on the pinto in that forsaken country where every hand was against him. (He himself could go—he had gone—three days without a bite to eat, without sleep.) He was wondering if he had not better be more careful, in case the Indians made early camp, when, climbing from a watered valley around a shaley cliff, the sound of a rifle shot from far ahead sent his crooked eyes flashing about for a place to conceal himself and Whiskers.

He had no rifle, and he longed for the one he had been forced to leave in the cave to deceive the Indians. His .45 revolver he would trust against any weapon at close range, but it was powerless against a rifle at more than sixty yards. And these Indians could shoot. In addition, he could imagine no one he was likely to meet within the Badlands who would not be armed with a rifle—and eager to shoot him on sight. Among his fellow-rustlers he had left a legacy of hatred when he fled to Canada. More than once since that time they had met within the Cypress Hills, and the outcome had always been tragedy. Two or three of them he had been forced to kill in self-defence—record of the killings carefully expunged from Mounted Police records at Medicine Hat, or manipulated to keep him from public attention—but the feud would never end until one side or the other was wiped out.

Where the sound of the shot had reached him there appeared to be no escape from the trail, for the cliff

closed in tightly on his left, and below him on the other side was a sharp drop to an alkali stream, down which he could not force the pinto. But he recalled that further back he had passed a sloping shaley cut in the cliff, and he wondered if there Whiskers might not be able to reach the level of the prairie above. Once there they would be safe, since the upper level served no purpose in the Badlands but to conceal the lawlessness of the lower trails.

Turning back, he found the cutting, and Whiskers clawed her way up, assisted from behind by Blue Pete's powerful shoulders. Ordering her to lie down well back from the edge, he threw himself down in the grass at a point where he could see the trail in the direction from which the sound of the shot had come.

This sudden evidence of human life had started a train of thought. A single shot—then it had not been a fight. The target could not be human. Yet the explanation did not satisfy him, for there were no animals one would waste powder on. With growing anxiety he eyed the afternoon sun. With the fall of darkness he dare not go on, for fear of falling into a trap. And by the time day dawned once more the Indians might have evaded him.

Suddenly an Indian laughed. It startled the half-breed. Indians seldom laugh aloud. And the sound had come from just beyond a bend in the trail.

The Indians, then, were on their way back. Laughing. They must be well satisfied with what they had done. Was he too late to discover what that was?

Around the bend, not three hundred yards away, rode a pair of braves. They were plainly in good humour. And there were only two sources to an Indian's satisfaction—settling a feud, and money easily made. Blue Pete remembered what Spud Taylor had said as he parted from the Indians: "I don't care how much you make over there." What they had made must

have pleased them. From whom and for what had the payment come?

The pair came on, riding lazily in single file. Two hundred yards behind them a third Indian came suddenly into view. He carried a rifle in his hand—the gun, certainly, that had fired the shot Blue Pete had heard.

The trail ran close beneath where the half-breed lay, crowded into a narrow strip by the drop to the alkali stream on the other side. The pair in front passed and disappeared around a bend beyond. Their companion seemed to be making no effort to overtake them. He rode a little uncertainly, and in a moment the half-breed understood. For the brave, taking a flask from his pocket, placed it to his lips, and tilted his head back.

It happened at the moment Blue Pete hung straight above him. The dark face of the Indian dropped back for the drink—and a pair of startled, incredulous, terrified eyes stared straight up into the half-breed's face.

Blue Pete launched himself forward.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### SURPRISED INDIANS

TOO surprised even to cry out, the Indian went crashing from his pony, the flask falling into a slide of shale. Blue Pete's right hand was pressed tightly over his lips, while with his left he seized the rifle and wrenched it free.

The Indian pony stumbled at the shock, but it did not fall. It reared, twisted sideways, and commenced to buck, the instinctive resistance of the wild horse—the origin of bucking—to the attacks of cougars leaping from overhanging branches.

Blue Pete and the Indian had crashed to the ground. Dropping the rifle, the half-breed tore the Indian's cartridge belt free, then, with a fling, sent him tumbling over the edge.

The pony, finding itself free, galloped on. The Indian, only temporarily stunned, picked himself up at the edge of the stream and felt for his revolver. Blue Pete saw the move and stepped back out of sight.

Then he realized that he had cornered himself. He could not climb the face of the cliff at his back; it was too steep, and it would bring him within range of the Indian on the lower level. He dare not return to where he and Whiskers had climbed, since at any moment the braves who had gone on might return, warned by the fleeing pony of their unfortunate companion. To go on would bring him within range of the Indian below.

The one thing that offered was to stand and defend himself against attack from the braves who had gone ahead—and that would almost certainly mean a fight to the death. It irritated him that at this critical moment the rules of the Mounted Police game should come into his head and threaten to handicap him, but they were there, and, so far as he could, he must observe them.

The brave below the cliff was shouting now, warning his companions. Blue Pete stood with his back against the rock, waiting. The Indians were cowardly, but they would never let him get away with what he had done.

After a few moments he knew by the sound of the shouting beneath him that the Indian had hurried forward to get in touch with his friends. Then a deep silence fell over the scene, an ominous silence that brought drops of perspiration to the half-breed's forehead.

The moment was too tense for him to remain where he was. Inaction, uncertainty, always drove him to recklessness. Besides, it occurred to him that the Indians might adopt the plan he had used to get the advantage of them—climb to the upper level. Once there, both he and Whiskers would be at their mercy. And almost with the thought, Whiskers whinnied down on him from directly over his head.

With an angry wave to her, he ran along the trail, seeking a place to climb. A slit in the cliff opened in one place, a narrow chimney of rough rock that seemed to offer what he sought. He started to climb. But the rock was friable and laid in shallow strata that snapped beneath him, sometimes tumbling him back, sometimes leaving him suspended by his hands, scratched and bruised. Only the tough leather of his chaps saved his legs from serious injury. At last he was forced to drop rifle and cartridge belt.

When he finally managed to claw his way to the upper level, Whiskers was far away, galloping wildly

about, dodging frantically from side to side. He knew what it meant, and his eyes flew across towards the place where he and the pinto had climbed. The face of an Indian appeared for a moment, and the barrel of a rifle slid out before it.

He had just time to drop back into the chimney when a bullet whistled over his head.

At that distance his .45 Colt was useless. Accordingly he crouched where he was until he could devise some plan. He was safe there—so long as an Indian did not work around beneath him.

At a sharp whistle Whiskers lay down and, taking a chance, Blue Pete saw with relief that she was out of sight now. It was the depression into which she had dropped that gave him an idea. Carefully examining the level before him, he discovered that the ground fell slightly away along the edge of the cliff. Was it depressed enough to protect him from a rifle-shot from across the point?

It was his one chance, since at any moment, knowing where he was, and aware that he had no rifle, one of the Indians might creep up on him from the foot of the chimney. Cautiously he slid his body out on the grass, keeping his head down, his sombrero crushed in one hand. When no shot came, he decided that he must be out of sight. Following the sloping edge of the cliff, he crawled along to where he overhung the trail.

He was just in time to see a brave slinking along beneath him, making for the chimney he had just left.

Drawing his .45, he fired. The rifle clattered to the rocks, and the Indian, unhurt but terrified, turned and ran.

The rifle lay there below the half-breed, and he could not resist it. Dropping over, he picked it up and hurried after the fleeing Indian. Offence, he figured, was now the better defence.

Again he was just in time. Poking his head cautiously around the bend in the face of the cliff, he saw the three braves. Two stood on the trail, their eyes turned upward. The third lay in the shale near the top of the cliff. The three ponies were grouped not far away. The Indian near the upper level raised himself carefully higher and looked over, this time in the direction where Whiskers lay. Something of the pinto must have been visible, for his rifle slid forward.

Blue Pete upset it all. Stepping into the open, he sent a bullet crashing into the shale close beside the Indian's body, splattering him with dust and fine pieces of stone. With a yell the brave let himself go, rolling in a cloud of dust to the trail below. The other two, their rifles gone, started off at top speed for their ponies. The third Indian, his own rifle dropped in his fright, followed them, dodging from side to side, while Blue Pete sent a couple of bullets whistling about his ears.

"Yip-ee!" he shrilled.

Chuckling, he picked up the third rifle, passed back along the trail to the one he had been forced to drop in the chimney, and with the three in his hands returned to the shaley slope and climbed. At a signal Whiskers rose and came galloping to him, her tail whisking furiously. From the distance came the pounding of retreating hoofs.

Whiskers heard the sound. She raised her spotted nose and whinnied triumphantly.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### IN THE BADLANDS

ONCE more, partly by good fortune, Blue Pete had succeeded in untangling himself from a situation that for a time was gravely threatening; and for a few moments he thrilled to the old feeling of exultation.

But Whiskers, nuzzling against him, brought him to his senses. True enough that he had escaped without injury, but what part of his purpose had been served by it? After all, he had not come for the mere satisfaction of getting out of trouble he might have avoided by staying in the Hills; and he stared fiercely along the trail the Indians had taken, wondering if all that lay before him now was to return the way he had come, and empty-handed. A sense of futility brought a groan from his lips. Through almost two days he had dogged the heels of the Indians, only to come up with them when everything was over. With not a glint of light thrown on their purpose in coming to the Badlands. And the incident of the last hour seemed to ensure that nothing would now be learned.

But second thoughts made the picture less gloomy. In the time the Indians had been away to the south they could not have gone far. Whatever they had been about must have been accomplished within a short ride.

What had taken place at the end of that ride?

It was enough to decide him. Leading Whiskers down to the trail, he struck towards the south, leaving the Indians, for the moment, out of the picture.

With every immediate need for caution removed, he rode fast. And as he advanced the Badlands became more desolate, more broken, with deeper chasms and steeper cliffs. Anyone else must have been oppressed by the isolation, but he was too familiar with it for that. He knew that on and on it stretched, for a good day's ride farther, right down to the Missouri River. The rifle he had with him now added to his sense of security. The other two he had cached separately, thinking to pick them up on his return, should he need them. He had lost enough rifles of late to take the precaution.

Until it was too late to follow the trail the Indians had left here and there he continued. Then he stopped. From that point two or three routes were possible, and he dare not take a chance of making a mistake, particularly when he must be near the end.

Beside a slough he dismounted and satisfied himself that he was still on the right trail. But, to his surprise, he found, in the soft margin beside the water, distinct marks of seven or eight horses. Yet there had been only three Indians. He decided to wait for daylight before continuing his way.

Puzzled and worried, he withdrew from the trail to a narrow valley he knew, where grass grew plentifully. The wind had risen and blew in dismal wails into the crevices. He lay down in a sheltered spot and tried to sleep.

The night-life of the Badlands came out, hideous, raucous, unearthly denizens of haunts where they had little need for caution save from one another—faint rustlings, too, the patter of small feet, the hiss of suspicious breathings—luminous spots in the darkness that vanished as swiftly as they popped into sight. In these canyons, in this waste, the record of native animal life was more disturbing because of the desolation. Yet there was really little danger to man, and Blue Pete, aware of it, was conscious rather of companionship.

Yet there was something unusual about the sounds to-night. It occurred to him only after complete darkness had fallen. Then it riveted his attention. Not only had the animal life come out at a later hour than usual, but the vocal evidence was broken and irregular, as if fear and suspicion lay heavily over the land. Was it his presence? He could not think so, for it had never been that way before.

The wind swept over him, blowing freely on the prairie level far over his head, reaching down in eddies and angry gusts to whirl about him, whining and complaining, through the lower depths.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet. With head thrust forward he whiffed at the air.

A tang of smoke had come sailing down the breeze!

He recognized it instantly. A night-fire, the sort he himself had built in the Badlands a thousand times to fight off the damp chill of the night, or as company, or to cook his sketchy meals. With a muttered exclamation he walked out to the trail, paused for a moment, then went on.

As he advanced, the odour became more unmistakable; he could almost place where it came from. Not far ahead was a valley he knew well, a pleasant spot to spend the night. Like a shadow he crept along. His eyes had almost the uncanny keenness of a cat's in the dark, but down there in the chasms of the Badlands the darkness was blacker, more opaque, so that at times he was forced to feel his way.

Pools and streams, rocks and jutting corners of the cliff, blocked the trail, but he was never at a loss; indeed, he seemed to recognize them all and was more definitely located by them.

He knew where he was going. Around the sweetly grassed valley, inside the cliffs that bound it in, grew a network of pine trees, so thick that a herd feeding in the open heart of the valley was invisible from the upper level. He himself had often run rustled herds

on the knee-deep buffalo grass that grew there, until he was ready to dispose of them. Along the margin of the trees, at one side of the valley, ran a stream of purest water. It entered the valley by a narrow slit in the cliffs, and flowed through the only other means of access to the peaceful feeding-ground.

In half an hour he had reached the nearer entrance. The stinging odour of the fire wafted to him now in a steady cloud, the burning of dead wood, with a slight taint of smouldering earth. He waded through the stream. The entrance to the valley was little more than a gorge, and before it he hesitated.

Once through that gorge, he might easily be cut off from retreat. And he could hope for no mercy from the men who must be responsible for the fire whose smoke he smelled. Whiskers he had left fully a mile behind, so that he would have to escape on foot, even if he succeeded in leaving the valley.

But that did not deter him long. He had to know, and he was too curious to take the time to return for the pinto. The gorge extended for fully a hundred yards, with the stream clinging to one wall, the narrow trail to the other. The cliffs towered sixty feet over his head. As he passed into the narrow defile the damp night-odour of evergreens from the valley beyond mingled with the smoke of the fire.

The sound of a voice raised in song reached him. He knew that song, one of the scandalous rhymes familiar among the cowboys. Blue Pete's eyes brightened, for it recalled old times.

As yet he could not see the fire, but he knew exactly where it was—where a hundred other fires had burned in other days. To his right, as the valley opened, down beside the stream, was a level rocky patch, almost entirely surrounded by trees, a haven for night campers.

Cautiously he worked his way forward. He picked a course through the screening pines. The single

voice he had first heard was joined by others; it became a chorus.

Blue Pete shook his head in perplexity. A cowboy singing at night was a familiar sound, for the night-herders sang to soothe the herds. But why were so many awake at such an hour? And this was no song of the night range. Then, with a start, he came within sight of the fire and saw that it was dying down. He saw, too, several figures moving about it—men with saddles in their hands.

They were saddling up.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE RUSTLERS

**B**LUE PETE stood within the trees and watched. That the group had met the Indians he knew. That the contact had been profitable to both was apparent.

But where did Spud Taylor figure?

"I don't care how much you make over there; I'll pay you what I promised when you get back."

That and this—it was all he had to go on. And as yet it meant nothing. Four cowboys about a fire they were letting die down because they were leaving—and in the dead of night! Did it mean that they had heard the shooting and taken warning? But that could not be, or they would not have delayed so long. That they were rustlers was certain, since no one else would be in such a place. But where were the cattle or the horses? He was convinced there were no cattle about; he would have heard them—or smelled them. Horses? He could not be certain of them.

And had he delayed a mere five minutes he would have come too late—with the mystery still unexplained!

Swinging off to the left, he hurried through the trees. When it was safe, he came out from the trees into the open valley and knew in a moment that no herd fed there, whether cattle or horses. Dropping into the long-striding lope that covered the ground with such deceiving speed, he made for the other entrance to the valley. The cowboys could leave no other way.

In ten minutes he reached the end of the valley.

The trees crowded around him once more, and feverishly he felt about among them with hands and feet. With a grunt of satisfaction his groping hands encountered a fallen tree that was light enough to handle. Its branches were still for the most part intact, sprawling about it like the legs of some gigantic spider. With some difficulty he dragged it away and dropped it across the trail.

Through it all he had clung almost unconsciously to his rifle. He felt more comfortable with it, though he had no mind to use it. His idea was simple enough—to delay the rustlers and perhaps, while they cleared the way, learn from their conversation what had happened—or was to happen.

Presently he heard them coming. Only the light thud of hoofs and the creaking of saddle-leather. He lay down in a good spot to hear. Close to the trail where he lay he figured that he might make out the shapes of the riders against the sky above the cliff across the valley.

They rode single-file, one after the other looming against the sky and passing on. Four of them. Then he noticed that the one in the rear was leading an unmounted horse.

He had placed himself some thirty yards short of the barricade, so that the fourth cowboy stopped immediately before him. The leading pair had dismounted before the tree that blocked their way and were discussing it.

"Damn it," said one, "it wasn't here last night."

"And it didn't just blow here," said another, in a low voice. He struck a match.

As the match flared, Blue Pete raised his head sharply. Between him and the flame stood the last horse in the line. Eyes staring, he rose to his knees—to his feet. A hand came up and drew across his lips, and beads of perspiration sprang out on his forehead.

For in the light of the match four white legs were plainly visible on the last horse in the line, the one that was led.

Blue Pete stepped forward. The fourth cowboy was too intent on what was transpiring ahead to notice anything. The half-breed raised his rifle. His finger closed sharply on the trigger.

The crack of the shot split the stillness of the valley with an ear-shattering blast, starting a succession of diminishing echoes from the surrounding cliffs. The cowboy's horse reared and fell sideways, its rider rolling out of sight.

The led horse reared and plunged about. But Blue Pete was at its side. He swung an arm about its neck, and the broncho's frantic leap helped to swing him to its back. The reins had fallen loose, and once the broncho stumbled, but the half-breed swung himself low beside its neck and managed to reach the hanging reins.

" Yip-ee! " he shrilled.

Three revolver shots flashed through the darkness towards him, but by that time he was too far away to be reached by anything but a rifle; and their rifles were in their saddle-holsters.

Unfortunately, in swinging himself to the broncho's back he had been forced to drop his own rifle. But he remembered the two he had cached back along the trail and did not worry. The rustlers would be sure to follow, but they would come carefully, fearful of ambush in the darkness. They would probably wait for daylight, and by that time he would be well away.

He had scarcely cleared the gorge at the other end of the valley when Whiskers, who must have heard the shooting, came racing to meet him. Leading her back, he saddled her and started on, still mounted on the horse he had taken from the rustlers. A smile had settled on his dark face, and now and then he stopped



to jig a little in the saddle. Once he could not restrain that challenging "Yip-ee!" It beat against the cliffs, mangled, ghostly, inhuman.

Daylight was dropping a vague thinness through the dark depths of the trail by the time he neared the place where he had cached the two rifles he had taken from the Indians. By that time, in spite of his elation, spasms of uncertainty, of foreboding, flooded him. Surely he could not hope to get away so easily, so bewilderingly successful! Perhaps it was that dread that had kept him mounted on the broncho he had taken from the rustlers: it might be that Whiskers, fresh, would be the difference between life and death. There had been times like that.

As usual Whiskers protested, feeling neglected.

The half-breed shook his head at her. "Ain't yuh got no sense, ole gal?" he reproved. "You know 'tain't likely to go easy like this all th' time."

The nearest rifle he had cached some distance from the trail, and he found it without trouble. Humming, feeling almost safe now, he continued his way. The second rifle was further on and, since he could use only one, he at first decided to leave it where it was. But something kept working inside him, and he found he could not go on without, at least, taking a look at the rifle; and those strange instincts he had learned never to ignore.

The place where he had hidden it was down the cliff below the trail. It would not be visible from anyone riding along the trail, but by climbing only a few feet down the cliff he would be able to see it. Growling at himself for wasting time, he dismounted and commenced to descend. But even as his foot touched the first narrow shelf of rock he paused. Again that warning sense came to him. Looking about to make certain the two bronchos were out of sight, he retreated to the cliff wall beside the trail and, with his back to it, carefully studied the scene about him. It was

broad daylight now, and not a nook or cranny escaped his prying eyes.

He tried to picture what could have happened. The cowboys could not have worked around ahead of him. The Indians?

He had always held them in contempt. On even terms he had nothing to fear from them. And they had no rifles. But—had they returned and found the one below him? They were treacherous, cunning and unforgiving, and his recent experiences with them in the Cypress Hills had given him reason to treat them with more caution. Now they would be doubly keen to get him, willing to risk something for revenge. And here in the Badlands murder would be safer even than in the Cypress Hills.

Sinking slowly down, he lay flat on his stomach and slid across the trail. Easing his face over the cliff, he looked below.

The rifle was not where he had left it!

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### DANGEROUS EVENTS

FOR several minutes he lay, scarcely believing his eyes, assuring himself that he had made no mistake about the spot. It was, however, he was forced to recognize, a time for greatest caution. Someone had found the rifle and taken it.

With the patience of the Indian he waited. When nothing happened, he worked his way along to where he could climb down.

Suddenly he stopped and slunk back against the cliff. From somewhere out of sight below him a small stone had sailed out and clattered across the rocks, to plunge into the pool.

Someone was down there, someone bewilderingly careless; someone who did not know anyone else was about. That meant that it could not be the Indians, for they would have been lying in wait for him.

A second stone bounced into the water, the sharp click echoing against the opposite cliffs.

There was something uncanny about it—just a pebble flung with careless, invisible hand, there where nothing should be done with such thoughtlessness, so little sense of peril. Blue Pete felt uncomfortable, uncertain, a little alarmed. But for the instinct developed by the life of peril he had lived he might have crept away and left well enough alone.

But he could not do that. The unexplained was always threatening. Edging along the trail, he looked over the edge of the cliff.

"Wal, I'll—be—gol—durned!"

For on a rock, close beneath the cliff, sat Andy Farren. His white ten-gallon hat lay on the rock beside him. Across his knees rested the rifle Blue Pete had cached, and now and then the young man looked down on it in a puzzled way. Once he raised it, examined the magazine, and set it back on the rocks beside him. Then with a sleepy "ho-hum!" he rose, picked up the rifle, and commenced wearily to climb back to the trail.

Blue Pete hurried to where he had left the two bronchos and urged them out of sight around a corner of the cliff. And in a few minutes Andy passed, riding on towards the south at a smart pace.

The half-breed scratched his head and whistled.

"Gor-swizzle! Wot th' blazes 's he doin' down here?"

But beyond the mystery of it, the encounter gave him clearly to understand that things were not so clear as he had imagined during the past few hours; and he had a feeling that he was not yet out of the bush.

The one prodding uncertainty was, where were the Indians? Had Andy, working with them, come to lead him into their clutches? He had seen them together only a few nights ago, with Spud Taylor giving orders he now understood; but Andy had appeared not even to listen.

Could it be that the young man had come to complete something wherein the Indians had failed, something Spud did not trust them to complete? Had he come south, missed them on the way, and continued, certain to meet them sometime? That Andy must have known Spud's plan was evident from that night within the Hills. Yet he had more than once proven himself friendly with the half-breed, even in the face of the popular feeling against him.

More mystery. And just when he felt that the

future was plain sailing, when he was on his way back with his task unexpectedly accomplished!

It had its effect, the usual one: he could not go on without knowing more. And so he lingered, fighting against the urge to go back, to follow Andy and see what he had in mind.

He had not moved when a rifle-shot rang out. It had come from only a short distance along the trail to the south. He looked about for some place to climb to the upper level. He dare not investigate along the trail, for it would be three against one—perhaps four, if Andy had joined the rustlers. The fourth rustler's mount had fallen before the half-breed's bullet, so that he was out of it. What the shot meant he did not stop to figure out—except that this was no time to go back or go on.

The cliffs were slightly lower there, but they appeared to be unscalable. There was, however, one chance. The two bronchos were safe enough for the time being in the cleft where they stood, and he could leave them. Placing Whiskers against the cliff, he unfastened his rope, stood on the saddle, and managed to get his fingers on a projecting ledge from which he drew himself up.

He had not come without a plan. He knew that the canyon through which the trail ran was fairly straight and unbroken on this side for a long distance, so that he would be able to follow it on the upper level towards the spot from which he judged the rifle-shot had come. Up there, safe from observation, he would be able to follow what was happening.

Again he had been forced to leave his rifle below, but the trail was well within range of his .45, and with that he was better armed than with a rifle. Why he had brought the rope he did not stop to think.

There was no danger of being seen from below, so that he made fast time along near the edge of the cliff. And as he ran, a second shot snapped through the silence,

and his curiosity increased to genuine alarm. Andy Farren was there, and whatever the young man had in mind, if he was in danger something must be done for him. It was, at the moment, the north against the south, Alberta against Montana, a reckless young man against a gang of cold-blooded murderers when murdering promised profit.

It was strange that at that moment a thought occurred to him that made his heart beat more rapidly, his legs move faster: Andy could not have met the Indians or he would have been on the look out for the half-breed.

Presently he heard voices, and, creeping to the edge of the cliff, he peered over.

What he saw sent a quick dart of alarm through him. Three rustlers were clustered about Andy, crowding in on him. And it did not need their angry voices to show that they threatened him. Andy appeared to realize his danger, a real danger, for he kept edging away from them.

Suddenly one of the rustlers reached out and jerked him from his horse. Then they fell on him. And when the sudden turmoil was over, Andy lay helpless, bound with his own lasso.

Without delay two of the rustlers mounted and set off at a gallop along the trail to the north. The third was left as a guard.

Blue Pete had seen every move. But he did nothing. Andy was in no immediate danger, and only by watching could he learn what he wished to know. The pair that had ridden away must hope to overtake him; he had had no delusions concerning the manner in which they would take his attack the night before. They never forgot or forgave. Andy's fate could wait.

Their treatment of Andy added to the bewilderment in Blue Pete's mind. Whatever their relationship with the Indians, they had no dealings with

Andy; did not, it seemed, even know him. And a stranger in the Badlands was always an enemy. What the young man's end would be, particularly if they lost Blue Pete, the half-breed could well imagine, for he knew their tempers, their ruthless cruelty.

Blue Pete realized that his own position was delicate. From that part of the trail there was only one way to the north, and the rustlers had cut him off in that direction. Yet his own safety concerned him only as it concerned Andy Farren.

Whatever he did must be done quickly, for the rustlers would return without riding far, convinced that he had somehow evaded them, since he could not go fast with an extra horse. Some distance back there was a branching trail, and they would decide he must have taken it.

Moving on until he was directly over the rustler left to guard the young man, Blue Pete lay down and looked over.

Andy lay on his back, legs and arms bound in the effective way the rustlers knew so well—a familiar hitch that defied every effort to struggle free. It was painful, too. Blue Pete had used it himself many a time. The rustler lounged against the cliff, his legs crossed, rolling himself a cigarette.

"I tell you," Andy was saying, "I met no one. If Blue Pete was here, I must have missed him."

The rustler laughed mockingly. "Mighty skeered fer bein' so innocent. Why'd yu try to run?"

"Because—because I didn't know who you were. I didn't know you——" He stopped and turned his face away.

"Ho-ho! Yu bet yu didn't know. Yu don't know yu met the 'breed neither, do yu? . . . Well, yu ain't likely to be ast again . . . 'cause yu won't be meetin' nobody ever again."

"But I tell you——" Andy began, half angry, half anxious. "Oh, what's the use?"

At that moment his upturned eyes stared straight into a dark face hanging over the cliff above his head.

The rustler must have noticed something in the staring eyes, for he frowned down on Andy, then, with an exclamation, leaned away from the cliff to look upward.

That was the movement Blue Pete had been waiting for. The coil of the rope dropped straight over his head and down his arms. The rustler, with the instinct of resistance, leaped away. It was his undoing, for it tightened the coil about him, binding his arms to his side.

Instantly Blue Pete was on his feet, drawing the rope in. Bracing himself, he hauled the fellow from the ground, leaving him dangling in mid-air.

But it was not all over yet. The rope was taut against the sharp edge of the rock, and the weight of the rustler was beginning to cut the strands. He was shouting for help, too, and Blue Pete had no idea how far away his companions were. Yet there was nothing more he could do at the moment. To drag at the rope, thus increasing the strain and unravelling the cut strands, might complete the break. And Andy could do nothing to help.

Hand over hand Blue Pete worked down the rope towards where it bent over the cliff. The strain was terrific, calling on muscles little used. But at last he succeeded in squatting on the ground, and from that position he was able to advance his face far enough to look over.

He discovered that the rustler was less helpless than he thought. While his arms were caught below the elbows, they were held against his stomach, and with his right hand he had managed to reach his revolver hanging low in front. With a flexible wrist he might be able to shoot upward at Blue Pete, or, more certainly, down at Andy.

Carefully watching the rope, the half-breed commenced to twist it. His idea was to swing the rustler



around so that his back would be to the cliff, but it did not look promising.

A scrambling sound came up to him over the edge of the cliff, and Andy called out:

"Hold him there, Pete. He can't hit me now."

Blue Pete groaned. "Gor-swizzle, I ken't hold 'im here till he starves."

He ran his eye along the edge of the cliff. A few feet to the right a spur of rock projected. If he could wind the rope around it and free his hands! Carefully he edged his way towards it, rolling the rope along. Reaching the spur, he bent the rope over it, held it with his feet, and with a flip sent a coil curling over it. A second coil followed, and a third, a simple roping trick. The last one he sent in reverse, locking them all. Then he was free.

With a grin he ran along to the left and leaned over. The rustler had worked his hand free a little and was watching for him at the top of the rope. Blue Pete had his own gun out. He fired. A howl of pain and rage greeted the shot, and the rustler's gun clattered to the rocks below.

Blue Pete grinned down on him.

"Real mean, ain't yuh, Butch?"

The rustler's teeth gnashed together. "We'll git yu yet, Blue Pete, damn yu!"

"Shure, shure! But 't's lots o' fun till yuh do. Thought yuh hed muh this time, didn' yuh, Butch? Yuh was willin' tuh waste all this time an' work fer jes' one bronc, ef on'y it got muh put away fer a few years—or skeered back out o' Canada tuh whar yuh cud do some safe shootin', wasn' yuh? But it jes' didn' work out thet way. Funny way we meet agin, Butch."

The rustler shouted more lustily for help. Blue Pete drew the rope up. He bound Butch with the same hitch he had used on Andy.

"Noisy, ain't yuh, Butch? Wal, I kin stop thet. Allus did gas a lot, yuh did."

He untied the rustler's kerchief, rolled it about a handful of grass, and tied it across his mouth. Then he carried him back from the edge.

Returning, he climbed down to the trail, dropping most of the way. Andy, freed, stretched himself, yawned, and tried to laugh.

"Well!" he said. "I give it up. You're always on hand. How the devil, Pete——"

Blue Pete jerked a thumb northward.

"Ain' got no time fer gassin' now, boy. We gotta git outa this." He examined the side of the cliff.

"But my horse," protested Andy. "What about it?"

"Tuh blazes 'th yer hoss!" He stalked to where the two bronchos were tied and released them. "Git goin'."

Reluctantly Andy picked the most likely spot and commenced to climb. Blue Pete was busy with the bronchos. He released the cinch of Andy's saddle, removed it and the bridle, and with the two pieces in his arms watched Andy climb.

"Here, ketch this."

He tossed Andy's rope up, and at the third attempt Andy managed to get hold of it.

"Now drop one end."

Andy did so, and Blue Pete fastened it to the saddle.

"Draw 'er up. We ain' givin' no prizes to them rustlers fer bein' tough. Besides, yuh'll need 'em."

The two horses had not moved. Blue Pete lashed them with his quirt, and they went racing along the trail to the south.

Andy, from the top of the cliff, watched every move with a puzzled, annoyed expression; and when Blue Pete joined him he turned his face sulkily away.

The half-breed paid no attention.

"Guess th' ain' nothin' tuh do now but wait," he muttered, "an' yuh might do a bit o' prayin'."

But it was not in him to wait if there was anything to do, and after a few minutes he set off towards where he had left Whiskers and the other broncho.

"You go drag thet frien' o' yers off funder so his mates won' hear them groans. I bet he's slingin' a lot o' nasty langwidge, ef on'y we cud hear wot he says."

He had Butch's rifle, and it made him feel better. But he was worried about Whiskers. The pinto had been left half a mile away, and anything might have happened. Suppose, for instance, the rustlers had found her. In that case there was a good chance that he and Andy would starve before they could work their way out of the Badlands.

But he found the two bronchos where he had left them. Whiskers had placed herself squarely across the cleft, before the other horse, so that nothing short of a sustained search would have found them from the trail.

Blue Pete looked around. Andy was relieving himself of some of his outraged feelings on the person of the helpless rustler, and the half-breed signalled for him to come.

Near the edge of the cliff they waited. Up there they had every advantage. They could not be reached from the trail, and they were in a position to protect the bronchos.

They had not long to wait. Blue Pete had placed himself where he could see some distance along the trail, and in a few minutes he motioned to Andy that the rustlers were coming.

The moment they were past, he drew Andy to the edge of the cliff above the bronchos.

"Now's our chance, Andy. We gotta git outa this, an' durn' fast. It's hell-fer-leather fer us. Yuh gotta jump some here, but it won' hurt yuh's much as them rustlers hed it in mind tuh do tuh yuh back thar."

Andy dropped saddle and bridle over, then managed

to make his way down. Blue Pete landed beside him. The two bronchos were only a few yards away. Andy turned to them, a question on his lips. But as his eyes went past Whiskers and landed on the other horse, his lips remained open, his eyes stared. And then he threw his head back and laughed. Blue Pete grinned and drew his hand across his lips.

"Saddle 'im up, boy. I'll let yuh hev 'im fer a nice ride back tuh th' range. He don' go so bad bareback, but 't's a tough go through this hell-hole."

Still laughing, Andy obeyed. But as he lifted a foot to the stirrup to mount, Blue Pete stopped him.

"No, yuh bes' take Whiskers. She'll git yuh thar, an' fast, ef they git after us."

They rode out on the trail and set off to the north. But they had gone only a few minutes when Blue Pete pulled up.

"Git along, boy. I got suthin' tuh do back thar yit. Fergit all 'bout me. Jes' keep goin' straight fer th' Hills. Whiskers knows th' way. Don't think o' me. I'll meet yuh in th' Hills day after to-morrer."

Andy looked anxious. "What's up, Pete? Aren't we hanging together till we get out of this? Is there anything to do that I could help at?"

Blue Pete shook his head. "Do wot I say, boy. Yuh ken' do nothin' but git in th' way. . . . I jes' ken't le'e thet skunk back thar tuh starve tuh death. 'Member, day after to-morrer in th' Hills—this side, near whar the spur runs this way."

Wheeling his broncho about, he rode back. In a few moments the bends in the trail swallowed him.

He had worked out in his mind what the two rustlers would do. Not finding the pair they had left, they could only conclude that for some reason they had set off for the south. For a time they would hurry after them. But it would not be long before they would know that something had happened. They

might even overtake the two loose horses. Then they would return, searching for clues.

There was an important time factor about it. If they returned too soon, they would have Blue Pete where he might have to shoot his way out. It was not fear for himself, but for what he might be forced to do that made him hurry.

He found the cleft from which he had climbed to the upper level, and clambered up from his mount's back. He found that Butch had not been idle. He had rolled himself half-way to the edge of the cliff, and had worked some of the gag from his lips. Blue Pete picked him up and carried him to the cliff. He removed the gag.

"All right, Butch. Now yuh kin yell yer head off. Yuh're too mean a cuss tuh le'e yuh kick out decent like this, an' I ain' got nothin' agin th' wolves. Them other two skunks'll be back. Yuh kin make thet a prayer, anyways. Mebbe we'll meet agin. S'long! An' after all this I still ain' no hoss-thief!"

He ambled back to the broncho and rode it around beneath where the rustler lay. He fired two shots into the air and rode off after Andy.

But he had no thought of overtaking that young man.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### BACK IN THE HILLS

THE fact was that Blue Pete's orders to Andy were part of a carefully laid plan in which Andy played no part. By another trail he knew well he would reach the Cypress Hills ahead of the young man. There were mysteries still to unravel, and in the process Andy's presence would be a handicap.

It was normally a good two-day ride, but he set out to better the time. Andy, he figured, would loaf for a time, hoping he might overtake him; then, finding himself deserted, he would hasten to get clear of the Badlands. On the prairie, where he would feel safe, he would linger once more. The difficulty was that Blue Pete was unacquainted with the capabilities of his new mount, though he judged him to be a good sample of horseflesh. But if Whiskers took it into her head to hurry, he could not hope to outrun her, particularly by a longer route.

In giving the pinto to Andy he had two objects in mind. In the first place he was somewhat uncertain of the outcome of his effort to save Butch's life; and, in case of failure, he did not wish Whiskers to pay for it. In the second place, if he was captured by the rustlers they would certainly set off after Andy, and the swift, tireless pinto would give him his chance to escape.

Reaching the point where the trails divided, he made certain that Andy had followed the one straight ahead, and he shifted to the west, making for another ford

of the Milk River. Conserving the strength of his mount, he rested every two hours, unsaddling at every alternate rest period. All night he rode, snatching only a few winks of sleep, and by early morning he was clear of the Badlands. Northward stretched almost a hundred miles of prairie to the Cypress Hills, broken by the Milk River and two of its feeders. The ford he was making for was on the Canadian side of the Border, for the river followed a south-east course. Straight before him, as he neared the Border in the late afternoon, loomed the dark line of the Cypress Hills.

He had not yet reached the small iron posts that mark the boundary of Montana when a sudden disturbing thought made him jerk the broncho to a stop.

The Indians! He had forgotten all about them. Would Andy come across them? And if he did, what about Whiskers? What story would he tell to explain the pinto, and how would the Indians receive it—whether Andy gave the true story or not?

A driving dread sent him racing eastward, concerned now for nothing but the pinto. But with saner reflection he realized that he could do nothing effective. For one thing, riding with Andy, he would be unable to avoid the Indians, should they be lying in wait for him, without taking the young man into his confidence. That he had no wish to do until he knew more, since Andy's position in affairs, and his presence in the Badlands, required some explaining. Again, a meeting with the Indians would certainly mean a fight, in case they had been able to arm themselves once more with rifles—and that might well mean the failure of a plan that had, thus far, turned out to be such a surprising success. The Indians more than ever would feel it necessary to prevent his return.

Depressed and anxious, he turned back. He found himself longing for Mira's advice, picturing at last how selfishly blind his course had been in the last

fortnight—fearful of what the result might be. No one would understand, not even Mira—and he longed for her and the Inspector to sympathize with the urge that had driven him.

Though not a post was in sight where he crossed the Border, he knew to a few yards when he reached Canada, and his spirits unaccountably rose. Though the impulses of the Mounted Police were to him so often unpredictable, and the Inspector's sensitiveness to international boundaries unaccountable, there were rules, definite rules, and, strange as they were, they were at least unalterable and frank.

It was dark by the time he neared the Cypress Hills, and both he and his mount were ready for a rest. Selecting a height where the night air was warmer, he lay down. But he could not sleep, and after a few short minutes he saddled and rode on, skirting the southern fringe of the trees and presently entering the forest. He had told Andy where to meet him, and he rode in that direction. He was in no hurry, for, he figured, Andy would not be likely to arrive before morning, preferring, even if he made good time, to spend the period of darkness out on the prairie.

A tingle of uneasiness and surprise shot through him when, from the darkness ahead of him, a familiar whinny reached his ears. Andy and Whiskers had arrived at the Hills before him! With a quick movement he cut off with his powerful fingers the answering greeting from the broncho he rode. Andy could not yet be aware he was near—and he, Blue Pete, was taking no chances. The fact that the young man had come so fast was in itself cause for suspicion. Had he joined the Indians, and were they with him now? Was Whiskers's whinny a warning or merely a welcome? Besides, Andy was not where they had agreed to meet, but several miles west of the point.

The sound of the young man's soothing voice relieved most of the half-breed's fears:



"Easy there, girl!" There was something tense about the whisper, and a heavy silence followed before Andy spoke again: "Did you hear something, Whiskers?"

Blue Pete chuckled aloud. And Whiskers, fighting restraint, came dashing through the trees.

"That you, Pete?"

"Shure is."

Andy laughed with relief. "Damn this little brute of yours! I couldn't hold her in; she's bossed me all the way. I'm fagged out trying to keep up with her. Even when we rested, she'd nip me awake to go on."

Suddenly his voice dropped to a whisper.

"Sh-sh-sh! I forgot. Don't make a noise. The Indians are somewhere about. I caught a glimpse of one of them back there where you and I planned to meet. Whiskers and I beat it."

"D'they see yuh?" enquired Blue Pete anxiously.

"I don't think so." He laughed in an embarrassed way. "I'm getting out of this as fast as I can. I don't want to meet them."

"Yuh seemed chummy 'nuff not so many nights ago," grunted Blue Pete.

"That," said Andy, "was another day." He added: "Being chummy with those Indians—well, that's why it's off."

Blue Pete sighed. "Yuh shure got me all tangled up, boy. I can't see——"

Whiskers, who had been nuzzling into his neck, suddenly jerked up her head, breathing loudly. The half-breed reached up to feel her nose and ears.

"Foller me," he whispered to Andy.

He hurried back to his broncho and swung into the saddle. Then he led deeper into the forest.

Whiskers ranged up beside him.

"Hear something?" Andy whispered. "I didn't. This pinto and you—I can't get on to things like you can."

"Bes' yuh never shud," grunted Blue Pete. "Whiskers heerd. Thet's good 'nuff fer me. I ain' takin' no chances."

"You've taken a lot of them, Pete," said Andy admiringly. "I don't blame you for trying to get through now. Gosh, when I think of Spud!"

They rode for a long time in silence, Blue Pete winding about in a maze that left Andy completely lost.

"Where the devil are we going?" he enquired irritably.

"Never yuh min' thet, boy"—grimly. "All yuh need know is yuh're comin' 'th me, thet's th' answer."

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### BLUE PETE MAKES A DEAL

**A** LONG the dusty trail northward towards Medicine Hat rolled the skeleton buckboard. On the spring seat sat Don Farren. He was alone. Horry was at home. Andy had been absent so long that his father had become anxious. And anxiety, in Don Farren, induced irritability. He had made up his mind—for the hundredth time—to put an end to Andy's wanderings. The vagaries of this younger son of his had got on his nerves, which were raw at the best of times—and these were not the best of times. He was not quite certain how he would apply the brakes, and he carefully avoided any conclusive estimate of his capacity for doing so; but he could, at least, cut down on Andy's allowance. Yes, that was it; the boy could not go far wrong without money. . . . Yet he had to admit that nobody else seemed to be able to extract as much entertainment out of life without funds.

Anyway, it had to end. For one reason, because Don Farren had worries enough of his own. There was that affair of Spud's, for instance.

He sidled determinedly away from that and frowned into the distance, his feet braced against the iron rod fixed to the front of the buckboard, struggling to bring his thoughts to some scheme for taking the starch from Inspector Barker's manner. Those last two visits to the barracks had left a stinging sense of defeat, of insult, of unearned contempt, in his mind. And this affair of Spud's—

He jammed his big black sombrero more tightly on his head and swore.

There is no smoother roadway in the world, or softer, than the prairie trail after weeks of dry weather—except where ruts still remain from crossing buffalo trails. And that, combined with the dazzling, monotonous, greyish-yellow of the dead grass makes it insidiously somnolent. But the straight, stiff neck of the rancher never weakened, his eyes remained wide and frowning.

For behind him, beating a measure of chagrin and something like shame into his thoughts, came the steady beat of a horse's hoofs.

Presently, without turning his head, he made a peremptory gesture, and Spud Taylor reined up beside the buckboard.

"What's got me down, Spud," growled Farren, "is where the devil he can be hiding, if it isn't in the Hills. . . . And if he's there, then I don't feel a damned bit safe about things."

Spud made a scornful sound, circling his horse about a heap of dried buffalo bones that had lain for decades beside the trail, the horns long since rescued and polished by the Indians and sold to tourists on the trains that paused at Medicine Hat.

"It don't make no difference where he is—not that I can see. The Indians got clean away. I seen them off myself. We had him cornered in the cave; the Indians had, I mean, so he couldn't know."

Don Farren scowled at the sleek rumps of the bronchos. "What were they going to do with him—the Indians, I mean?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin' at all. All we wanted was to close him in there till we got away. I'm laughin' what he'll feel like when he gets out."

"But they *will* let him out? I mean, they're not going to harm him?"

"Not unless he gets nasty. He's had lots o' chance

before an' he ain't done nothin', so I guess he won't now."

Farren shook his head uncomfortably. "I don't feel right about it—not about any part of it."

"But it's sure goin' to get him out o' the country," comforted the foreman. "An' that——"

"I'm not so sure about that. . . . That was four days ago—or is it five—and we've heard nothing since. When we get back, I want you to look those Indians up and find out what happened. Those that went south ought to be back, shouldn't they?"

"Oh, they'll be back," said Spud, with more confidence than he felt. He had never felt quite easy about any part of it, and Farren's uneasiness weighed on him. "I'll get after them day after to-morrow."

"But where's the pinto?" demanded the rancher. "Do you think it would hide there in the Hills after it got away from the cave?"

"It musta. It shure ain't around the Three-Bar-Y. Dusty took a look yestiddy. Say, that 'breed'll be like a fish outa water without that cayuse. . . . It makes it easier for the Mounties to get hold of him—unless he gets clear away. He'll shure try it; he'll be scared stiff."

"Don't you believe it . . . And if the Mounties do get their hands on him, what then? They're suspicious fellows. Look here, Spud," he turned to face the foreman, "you better stay out of this talk with the Inspector. He's got a soft spot for the 'breed, or I'm mistaken. He isn't taking our word for anything. I tell you, I'm damned worried."

Spud let the buckboard draw ahead. He kept to the grass, upwind from the dust. But a few minutes later he was waved forward again.

"You know, Spud, it can't be the 'breed that's been doing all the rustling. Either he isn't in it at all, or he has others with him. He's been around too much where we know where he is, when we've

missed stock. I'm coming around more and more to think it's Lee Cutten. I hope it is," he added viciously. "I hate him a damned sight more even than the 'breed. If we can convince the Mounties——"

He stopped in mid-sentence at a violent, warning gesture from the foreman. Spud had turned in his saddle and looked behind. Now he jerked his thumb warningly over his shoulder and made a wry grimace.

Don Farren looked. Over a crest a rider came galloping towards them, sitting straight and stiff in the saddle.

"Well, I'll be—god—damned!" gasped the rancher.

Spud grinned uncomfortably. "Speakin' o' the devil." He fell behind.

The oncoming rider whirled up beside the buckboard. Farren had pulled the bronchos to a stop and sat staring angrily at him. To have continued to drive on seemed to savour of accepting the newcomer's companionship.

"Well, Cutten!" It snapped from his lips, while his eyes ran contemptuously over the horseman.

Cutten sat with erect shoulders, in no way a cow-puncher. His left hand was held stiffly across his waist, as he had been taught to ride as a boy. His deeply tanned face was still and gloomy, only slightly shaded by the old fedora he wore. As Don Farren spoke, he removed the hat and his hands mauled it about before his waist.

"May I speak to you, Mr. Farren—alone?"

A sneering smile appeared on the rancher's face as he waved Spud back.

"I don't see what the hell we have to say to each other, Lee Cutten. And the less we say the better. So make it short. You know what I think of you—a bloody intruder; and I don't intend to let you intrude any more than I can help. You know how you're hated around here, and that should be enough to keep you in your place. It happens you have the law

on your side, but before we're through—I'm warning you—you'll wish you'd quit before you started. I've nothing you want of me, and I'm damned sure——"

A sudden smile had struck the gloom from Lee Cutten's lean face lighting it up, making his eyes dance. Don Farren stopped in the middle of the sentence and frowned.

"But you *have* something I want, Mr. Farren, you *have*. You have what I want most in the world."

For a moment Don Farren stared at him, then he threw back his head and laughed insultingly.

"Yes, you'd like to have that corner of my land towards yours, there beside the stream. Well, you can't have a foot of it, not a damned foot. I'll rot in my grave before——"

The smile had vanished from Cutten's face. He was stiff again, a compelling dignity filling his lean frame.

"I don't want an inch of your land, Mr. Farren. I couldn't manage more than I have . . . and that nothing—not all the hatred of the ranchers—can or will take from me." His voice was hard. Then, as if recognizing the mistake of it, he cleared his throat, and a worried look came into his face. "I'm sorry things are as they are between us," he murmured, fumbling at his hat. "I had no idea you ranchers would feel as you do about my little effort. All I want is to make two blades grow where one grew before, to dig from the ground what has never been asked of it. Mr. Farren," he continued eagerly, "if I succeed, your land will be worth a fortune—and if I had your money I'd buy in more of it right away. There's a chance——"

The furious look on Don Farren's face stopped him.

"Damn you, Cutten, we don't want your two blades; we don't want more ground than we have—we don't ask more of it. We don't want you and your mad

pictures. We're content, damn you. Can't you see that? But enough of this. What do you want."

Cutten leaned over the wheel of the buckboard, his eyes soft and pleading.

"I want your daughter Gypsy, Mr. Farren."

In the mind-rending, dizzying surprise and shock of it the reins dropped from Don Farren's hands, and beneath the tan his face showed a sickly white. Then it flamed to scarlet.

"Why—why—why, you damned—you—you——" He gulped, choked by the intensity of his fury and indignation. "You—you have the damned impertinence to—to——" A savage laugh broke from him. It frightened the bronchos so that they leaped ahead. But Don Farren seized the reins and drew them brutally down. "Why—why, you—you rat, you miserable little ground-grubber, you—— My daughter! Ha, ha, ha! As if she'd as much as look at you!"

Cutten sat through it with impassive face. He had himself completely under control now.

"Would you be content to leave the decision to her, Mr. Farren? May I come to your house and ask her to tell you? Shall we——"

"No, no, no!" screamed the rancher, almost beside himself; for there rose in his mind a distressing suspicion. "You—may not—come near—my house! If I see your blasted face within rifle range I'll drill you like I would a coyote. If you——"

Spud Taylor came spurring to the buckboard.

"Mr. Farren! Mr. Farren! Look! Look!" He pointed to the south-east.

Farren turned as if he had been shot. His nerves were on edge. Some horrible fate seemed to ring him in.

Across the prairie, from the direction of the Inverted T, a pair of riders came tearing towards them. One, on a large broncho, was small, a large white



Stetson almost drowning him, white, hairy chaps forming a half circle about his mount. The other, tall, broad shouldered, was mounted on a very small pinto. They came as the cowboy rides, "burning the grass," body loose, arms held away from the body and flapping up and down.

"It's—it's Andy!" gasped Don Farren. "And—the 'breed!"

An involuntary shudder ran through him, and he removed his black sombrero and wiped a hand across his forehead.

Lee Cutten had eyes for no one but the paling man in the buckboard.

"Mr. Farren," he said. "Is that your last word?"

Don Farren blazed around on him. "Yes, damn you, my last word forever. And if it takes a more powerful rifle to keep you away I'll get it. If I see you so much as looking at my daughter——"

Blue Pete and Andy were on them then. Spud had passed around to the other side of the buckboard. For just a moment he eyed the half-breed, then, whirling his broncho on its hind legs, he started away at top speed.

Blue Pete whipped the rifle from the holster and sent a shot after him. It must have passed close to Spud's ears, for he ducked. A second shot took his Stetson. He pulled the broncho up and sullenly turned back. Blue Pete rode out and herded him in.

"An' I don' know how I let it miss yuh, yuh skunk," he said, through his teeth.

Don Farren had not even looked at the short flurry of pursuit. His eyes were fixed on the four white legs of the broncho Andy rode.

"Socks!" he gasped.

Andy grinned. "Sure it's Socks. Lucky getting it back, aren't we?"

"Where—how—did you—find it?"

Andy pointed to Blue Pete. "Better put the

question in another way, dad. It was Pete got it: he's got a way with him. Not much use trying to pull a thing like that on him."

Don Farren straightened his shoulders. "Who tried to pull anything on him, young man? Of course he'd be the one to find Socks. Who else would—if he wanted to? I guess he decided it wasn't safe to keep it any longer. We're lucky he hadn't a chance to get him across the Border." He was blustering, his voice rising.

"But it did get across the Border," laughed Andy. "Only, so did Pete."

Blue Pete reined in beside the buckboard. He leaned across the wheel and grinned into Don Farren's scarlet face.

"Dang dang'rus game yuh tried, Mister Farren." He turned to Lee Cutten. "Whar d'you come intuh this, Cutten?"

Lee Cutten flushed. "It's between me and Mr. Farren, Pete."

"Shure, you two an' Miss Gypsy. Wal, wot does he say?"

"He says if I so much as come within rifle range——"

Blue Pete nodded. "Shure. I know th' res'. An' ain't thet jes' too bad? Goin' tuh plug yuh jes' fer gittin' in range! Gosh, he ain' got much sense, hes he? Otta be proud, I says."

He turned back to the rancher. Farren sat holding himself under control. Too much had happened in the last few minutes to be certain as yet where he stood. Blue Pete nodded sadly.

"I guess yuh ain' goin' tuh shoot nobody, Mister Farren—'less it's yerself—fer shame. Yuh played a mean game, yuh did, you 'n' Spud here. An' yer danged 'shamed o' yerself. An' yer goin' tuh be danged lot more 'shamed o' yerself 'fore I'm through 'th yuh. 'Cause you 'n' Spud's goin' on intuh town 'th muh an' tell it all tuh th' Inspector."

Don Farren commenced to sputter. "But—but you haven't any proof. You can't——"

"Mebbe I hev'n't, an' mebbe I hev. Thar's the Injuns; they'll be skeered purty bad w'en I start talkin'. An' thar's th' night I jes' happened tuh be lyin' near yer ranch-house, an' I heerd you 'n' Spud cookin' things up agin muh. Yuh bes' ast them Montany rustlers how they like yer cookin'. But I guess you 'n' Spud paid 'em well 'nuff so they won't min' losin' Socks here. Say, won't th' Inspector like tuh hear all thet? . . . Oh, I guess I'll take a chance on provin' things. . . . An' don' fergit I do a dang lot o' ridin' all hours. An' I sort o' run ontuh things. An' some o' them's mighty mean—though th'ain' nothin' meaner'n tellin' th' Inspector I stole Socks. Called muh a hoss-thief, yuh did. . . . An' them Injuns—they thought they hed muh cooped up in thet cave. Some o' them know better now. By th' way, Spud owes 'em wot he promised thet night in th' Hills fer gittin' Socks across tuh Montany. I heerd thet, too. Great ears I got."

He chuckled, not sneeringly, not even triumphantly—only amused.

"So are yuh comin' on tuh th' barracks now, Mister Farren?"

Farren's face had gone white and red by turns. He dropped his eyes, and the hand that held the reins trembled. He leaned forward, his head down, like a beaten old man. He did not speak.

Blue Pete rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "O' course, thar's mebbe a way out. Yuh'd feel mighty mean on bread 'n' water in th' coop fer a coupla years, an' I sort o' hate tuh think o' Miss Gypsy's dad livin' thet way. . . . Mebbe I got a hunch Lee Cutten's not goin' tuh be shot, even ef he sashays right up tuh th' ranch-house at th' Inverted T. Mebbe yuh think Miss Gypsy's got sense 'nuff tuh pick 'er own man. Mebbe it ud break up th' house ef yuh didn' le'e 'er

to it. Sort o' strikes me ef yuh ain' larned yit she's bound tuh hev 'er own way, yer in fer a s'prise. 'Cause she's 'er dad's daughter. Ef she don't want Lee Cutten she'll dang soon say so, an' thet's th' end. Ef she does, shootin' 'im—wal, that ain' nohow no sense. Wot say. Mister Farren? Do we go on tuh th' Hat? "

Don Farren closed his eyes and shivered. He opened them. He gulped and said nothing.

Blue Pete smiled. He looked at Lee Cutten.

"Guess it's all right, Lee. But don' fergit, Miss Gypsy's a dead shot herself." As Cutten turned away he stopped him. "But git this intuh yer head: Ef I hear o' yuh rubbin' it in, I'll mebbe do some shootin' muhself."

For half a minute after Lee Cutten rode away no one moved, no one spoke.

"Guess we'll go on tuh th' Hat jes' th' same, Mister Farren," said Blue Pete. "I ain' goin' tuh let yuh down, never fear. All yuh gotta tell th' Inspector is I ain' no hoss-thief, thet's all. And, Spud, you ride ahead. I don' trust skunks."

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE INSPECTOR RIDES

**I**NSPECTOR BARKER unlocked his box at the Post Office and gathered up a rather lean handful of letters and two papers. The Postmaster heard the familiar click of the big box and poked his head through the wicket.

"Anything happening in your part of the world, Inspector?"

MacIntosh, the Postmaster, was an optimist. He had asked the same question from the first day he took charge of the Post Office, and not once in the five years had he learned a thing everyone else did not know. But he continued to nurse the hope that some day the Inspector would let him in on one of the lurid stories he read in the magazines about the Force "that always gets its man." As a fellow Government official he felt that something was due him. He had a hankering for thrills, having lived the mildest of lives. The spots of excitement that coloured Medicine Hat existence were worth all his previous existence crowded together, and there lingered in his mind the picture of himself as a hero, a headliner in the local paper. His experience of excitement to date, of touching the high spots, was the yip-eeing buster on a binge, and a Mounted Policeman scurrying up the street and disappearing out on the prairie.

At first the Inspector, following the usual routine, merely smiled. Then he broke the rule, and MacIntosh listened with every nerve.

"If nothing happens, Mac, you know we go out and stir things up. This quiet life wears on me as much as it does on you. And we have to maintain our reputation."

MacIntosh grasped the bars of the wicket with both hands. "They tell me you haven't caught the half-breed yet. What's the trouble?"

"That's the trouble—we haven't caught him. . . . That is, if you believe all you hear. But it's dangerous to do that, Mac, darned dangerous. We never do. And look out your nerves don't get the jump on you. I've known men who got thrills in church." He started for the door.

MacIntosh looked hurt, for his assistant was listening. "I was just wondering. The Three-Bar-Y hasn't got its mail for more than two weeks—though there's never anything for Blue Pete or his wife, except maybe an Eaton catalogue. There's one waiting for them now."

"Hang on to it, Mac. Blue Pete'll be calling for it some day soon." With a wave of his hand the Inspector passed out to the street.

The Postmaster withdrew his head and scowled at his assistant. "Condemn the Mounties! If they talked more, they'd learn more. I always say if they knew all we learn from the post cards and unsealed letters that come to this place—!" He shook his head significantly and stamped a letter so hard the metal bit through the envelope.

Inspector Barker passed down Toronto Street and rounded the corner into South Railway Street. His eyes were on the mail he carried. Presently he raised his face and his pace quickened. For before the barracks three Indians were grouped about their

ponies. The Inspector stormed across the railway tracks.

The Indians had not yet seen him. In their hesitant way with authority they seemed uncertain of the next move, lingering about the door, gloomy and sullen. Generations of the white man's laws had never quite effaced their claim to the freedom of their ancestors, but they were helpless to express themselves.

It was Grey Coyote saw him first. And they grouped together, uneasy, waiting.

The Inspector strode through them and opened the door.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. "You know I don't want you about the place. Get inside."

He pushed them before him and slammed the door.

"Why didn't you get a message to me if you wished to see me?"

The Indians waited, still as statues and as expressionless, until he was through. Then Grey Coyote stepped forward.

"We bring news. We know where Blue Pete is."

"But you told me that long ago. I knew it before you told me."

"We know where the horse he stole is."

The Inspector glowered at them, the points of his waxed moustache working furiously.

"Who told you he stole a horse—or anything else?"

Not a muscle of Grey Coyote's face moved. "We know. Blue Pete stole Inverted T broncho. You want him."

"Well, well, what about it?" The Inspector was growing more and more impatient.

"Bronc there in Hills. Blue Pete there with it."

The Inspector was all interest now. But in a moment he shook his head irritably.

"Do you mean to tell me he has had the stolen horse in the Hills all this time—nearly three weeks?"

"Horse there in Hills," persisted the Indian.

"But what use can it be to him there—one horse—and in the Hills?"

Grey Coyote turned to his companions and muttered something. Then, evidently ill at ease, he faced the Inspector.

"You say find him. We find him. We find horse. We tell you what he does. Like you said."

"Well, what about it? I told you you wouldn't get paid till I heard from Blue Pete. That's final."

"If he no speak?" asked the leader anxiously.

"Your loss, I guess. I'm not taking your word for anything. And that, too, is final."

Again the Indians put their heads together and talked.

"We take you to him," said Grey Coyote.

Inspector Barker eyed them in frank surprise. The Indians were plainly ill at ease. They had done something they knew would not please him; but they were determined to get the money at any cost.

They had him in a predicament. He had called them in with no suspicion where it might lead—certainly to nothing that would worry him as he was worried now. He chided himself for ever having imagined they would do more than get him into trouble. And now he could not get rid of them.

A thought came to him. If they led him to Blue Pete, the mystery at least would be cleared away; and that was worth almost anything. Without a word he went out into the hall and conferred with the orderly for some time. When he returned the Indians had not moved.



"You're going to lead me to him right now," he said.

He retired to another room and changed from his scarlet town tunic to the brown of active duty. Grey Coyote frowned and shook his head.

"You come alone?"

"Certainly."

"We no go. No good. Three-four Mounties. Blue Pete shoot us all."

"He won't shoot me," said the Inspector. "Are you frightened? If you are, you can go to hell. I'm through with you."

They conferred together for a time.

"We go," Grey Coyote announced.

"All right. Now listen. You ride out Toronto Street and wait for me out of sight of the town. I'll get some food together and join you in half an hour."

The Indians left. The Inspector hurried to a restaurant near the station, had some sandwiches and cheese put up, and returned. The orderly had his horse ready for him.

"Telephone Simmons right away. Tell him I'll pick him up." He stopped, frowning at the ground.

"No, better call up Sergeant Mahon instead: he knows the ways of the half-breed, and the Hills, better than any of us." As he rode out of the corral he issued a final order: "And, by the way, call up the house and tell Mrs. Barker not to look for me till I get back. I'll probably be away for several days. Tell Sergeant Mahon to have some supplies ready."

The Indians were waiting for him, and gloomily they fell in behind. Grey Coyote rode up beside him after a time and pointed to the empty rifle-holster.

"No gun?" he asked.

"Only my revolver."

"No rifles," grumbled the Indians. "No get Blue Pete. Blue Pete get us."

They drew up, clustered in a group, sullen and defiant. Inspector Barker rode up to them. He drew his revolver.

"You damned cowards. You're coming with me, and without rifles, or I'll teach you a lesson that's been coming to you for some time. I told you to go after Blue Pete without rifles. I know now you didn't. Go on."

They went, shaking their heads gloomily.

## CHAPTER XL

### LOOKING AHEAD

TEN miles out on the prairie they met, two assorted groups that, on the face of things, had no fraternal feelings towards each other. Miles apart they were visible, each at first merely curious, with the interest of travellers about to meet where travellers were few.

It was the Indians recognized Blue Pete first, and they grunted with surprise and consternation, and only the Inspector's keen watchfulness kept them with him.

The Inspector recognized the buckboard, and his eyes flashed. Something about the meeting promised drama. The Indians had dropped slightly behind, and he reined in to Grey Coyote's side.

"You're in this to the end now, you know—whatever that end is . . . And I think I smell a whole pack of rats."

Keeping Grey Coyote before him, they advanced. And presently he made out the spotted sides of the pinto, and his eyes brightened again.

"Grey Coyote," he said, and his tone made the stolid Indians shiver, "you're under arrest. There's been dirty work here."

There was excitement around the buckboard, too. Don Farren paled at the sight of the uniform. He beckoned Blue Pete to him.

"This is a hell of a mess for me," he groaned. "I—I couldn't have been thinking what I was doing, Pete."

I—hated you; it was that made me make such a fool of myself.”

Blue Pete nodded in a friendly way. “You hate so dang’ hard, Mister Farren. Thet’s ’bout all yuh gotta be skeered of.”

“I didn’t stop to think what a damned miserable thing it was. All I saw was that it looked as if it might—it might get rid of an enemy . . . get you out of the country.” Suddenly he raised his head and glared at the half-breed. “And, damn you, it’s the first time I ever apologized in my life.” His hand tightened on the reins. “Don’t think it’s because I’m scared. Nothing on earth ever scared me. But I’m ashamed—and that’s worse than being frightened. I see now how mean it was. A year or two in jail would only add to the disgrace, not wipe it out.”

Blue Pete grinned. “Ef yuh was any other sort o’ cuss than th’ kin’ yuh are, I’d let yuh try th’ coop fer thet temper o’ yers. You’ve bin takin’ it out on me an’ Lee Cutten. Never mind wot I am, but Lee’s a dang’ nice fella, an’ yer goin’ tuh like him w’en yuh git tuh know ’im. Thet gal o’ yers ain’t no fool. Her dad’s daughter ain’t apt tuh be thet. Yuh bin ridin’ yerself, Mister Farren. I ain’ goin’ tuh do yuh no harm. An’ Lee, he’ll jes’ finish off a dang’ nice family. You see ef he don’t.”

For a moment or two the rancher appeared about to burst into another furious blast, but the smile on Blue Pete’s face, friendly, confiding, even flattering, had its way.

“I guess you’re right, Pete: I hate too hard. . . . And don’t blame this on Spud. You know these cowboys, and I could have stopped it with a word.” He pushed back his sombrero and sighed. “If I only had! If only I’d stopped to think!”

Blue Pete’s grin widened; it became slightly sheepish.

"I dunno . . . I dunno. It's bin lots o' fun, an' I was spil'n' fer suthin' tuh happen. . . . An' I guess I got purty near tuh doin' some purty fierce hatin' muhself. See them Injuns comin'? Thar mighty near was three-four dead Injuns back thar in th' Hills. Mebbe we all hate harder'n we like—an' thar ain' much tuh do 'bout it. But—wal, lookit Lee Cutten. Don Farren's too big a rancher not tuh see Lee's doin' things 'zackly the way he'd do 'em hisself. D'yuh think yuh'd let any rancher skeer yuh off, ef you was in Lee's place? D'yuh think yuh'd think much of a son-in-law wot wud let hisself be skeered off? Yer shure lucky, Mister Farren."

He dropped behind.

Inspector Barker stopped them with uplifted hand.

"Well, Pete! I've been looking for you."

Blue Pete wiped his hand across his lips and grinned. "Thet's w'y yuh didn't fin' muh. I knowed wot was goin' on. But yer frien's thar met muh now 'n' then." He pointed at the Indians. "Caution how yuh run 'cross cusses yuh don' like in th' Hills."

The Inspector's face was stiff and expressionless. "What were you hiding from?"

"Didn' yuh know?" enquired the half-breed blandly. "From th' Mounted Police."

"Why?"

Blue Pete shifted about in his saddle to bring Spud Taylor and Don Farren under his eyes.

"Wal, yuh see, it sort o' got 'bout I was a hoss-thief. So I hed to prove I wasn't. I shure got 'nuff tuh answer fer 'thout thet. It kep' muh too busy tuh be took."

"Well?"

"Wal, I guess I proved it all right. Thar's the hoss they said I stole—the one Andy's on. Wot 'bout it, Andy?"

Andy spurred forward. "Pete's right, Inspector.

He didn't steal Socks from Dusty that night. We all made a mistake about it."

For several strained seconds the Inspector's eyes moved piercingly from face to face. Then his glance dropped to the shining silver buckles of the spurs Andy wore. They rose to the young man's face, and Andy flushed and looked away.

So did the Inspector. And as he addressed himself to Blue Pete a slight smile flitted about the corners of his lips.

"So they charged you falsely, did they—Farren and Spud? I suppose"—he turned to Don Farren—"I suppose, Farren, you didn't stop to think that if we'd arrested Pete, as you wished, someone would have been liable for false arrest? Indeed, if he wishes now to make a charge——"

Blue Pete chuckled. "Ef yuh put Mister Farren in the coop, Inspector, yuh'd hev me thar too mighty soon. Gor-swizzle, nobody keeps muh straight like he does. He's got me skeered o' doin' wot I'd shure break out tuh doin' ef I knowed he was outa th' way. No, sir-ee, I ain' makin' no charge."

The Inspector was not deceived. He knew the story was not half told, but no one was more content than himself to let it rest where it was.

"So you found the horse, Pete. Where? "

Slowly the half-breed's eyes widened, and a look amounting almost to horror grew on his dusky face. For he remembered then—remembered that Socks had been rescued across the Border in Montana, that he had taken it by force and brought it back. And Don Farren had a perfect right to dispose of a broncho he owned. A double crime. His mouth hung open.

Farren came to the rescue.

"Er—we found it in the Hills—strayed."

Inspector Barker left it there.

On towards Medicine Hat passed the buckboard.

The Indians, the moment they were free, had struck wildly away across the prairie, scarcely believing in their good fortune. They had no idea that the Inspector was even more delighted to get them off his hands, and under conditions that would seal their lips. Blue Pete and the Inspector rode alone.

"Pete, you're a devil. You know you're lying—the whole caboodle of you. And I wouldn't listen to the truth if you wished to tell it—not now," he added hastily. "So keep your tongue in your mouth. Do you know what this mess demands of me? Of course you don't; you never stop to think of anyone else, do you? I should resign. The things you made me do! . . . And now I'm afraid to know what *you* did. I'm not fit to be a Mounted Policeman."

Blue Pete studied his face anxiously. "Durn it, Inspector, yuh wudn' throw up th' job?"

"I won't, but, damn it, I should."

He sighed heavily and straightened his shoulders. "And now for the job we've neglected too long—for this damned nonsense of yours. What about those rustlers? I told you to get after them."

"An' I promised," replied Blue Pete miserably. "I guess I gotta git goin'."

"You certainly have to. . . . And don't forget there's a sweet five thousand in it for you when you catch them."

Andy Farren trailed Blue Pete about the town until he overtook him.

"Well," he laughed, "you got dad stooping that time, Pete. He's meek as Moses about Lee Cutten. What I want——"

Blue Pete gripped him by the shoulder and shook him irritably.

"Never mind wot *you* want, boy. Thar's suthin' *I* want. Wot th' durnation was yuh doin' over thar in th' Badlands?"

Andy's eyes widened. "Didn't you know? I was after Socks, the same as you were."

"Don' tell muh thet, boy. I seen you 'n' Spud an' th' Injuns fixin' things up tuh git Socks over tuh Montany."

"I know you did. But I had nothing to do with the fixing; I wasn't concerning myself about it at all. And then—and then I began to see—just like dad—what a miserable thing it was. So I set out to get Socks back myself for you; I thought I might do it and nobody be the wiser, and there'd be nothing against you."

"You thought—you could—do that—alone?"

"Of course. I had money with me to buy the broncho back. I thought they'd be only too glad to sell. I didn't know they were the toughs they are."

The look on the half-breed's face softened. "Gosh," he muttered, "th' things I don' see!" He patted Andy on the back. "Now then, yuh was sayin' suthin' 'bout wantin' suthin'."

Andy reddened. "Well, you see, you've done the impossible for Lee Cutten. There's something—something along the same line you might do for me. Only it shouldn't be so difficult, now that the Farrens and the Cuttens are on visiting terms."

Blue Pete's eyes crinkled knowingly. "Shure. I know wot yuh mean, Andy. It's thet Cutten gal. Big job, boy. Yer dad's gotta hard job jes' now tuh git round tuh seein' sense. An' ef he stan's out agin' us, yuh'll be in a nasty hole, 'cause yuh ken' git 'long 'thout his money. . . . Besides, Lee's agin yuh. An' yuh ain't done much tuh help yerself."

He looked down into Andy's eyes, and the latter looked quickly away. Blue Pete clapped him on the shoulder.

"Anyways, we'll make a try at it. Mebbe I kin fin' a way. . . . You 'n' me, we ain' through 'th each



other yit, boy." He paused, and looked away to the south, towards the Cypress Hills. "An' someways mebbe——" He stopped and sighed. "I gotta job, boy," he said. "Jes' yuh go pray we don' meet till it's over. Then, mebbe—who knows?"

THE END



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